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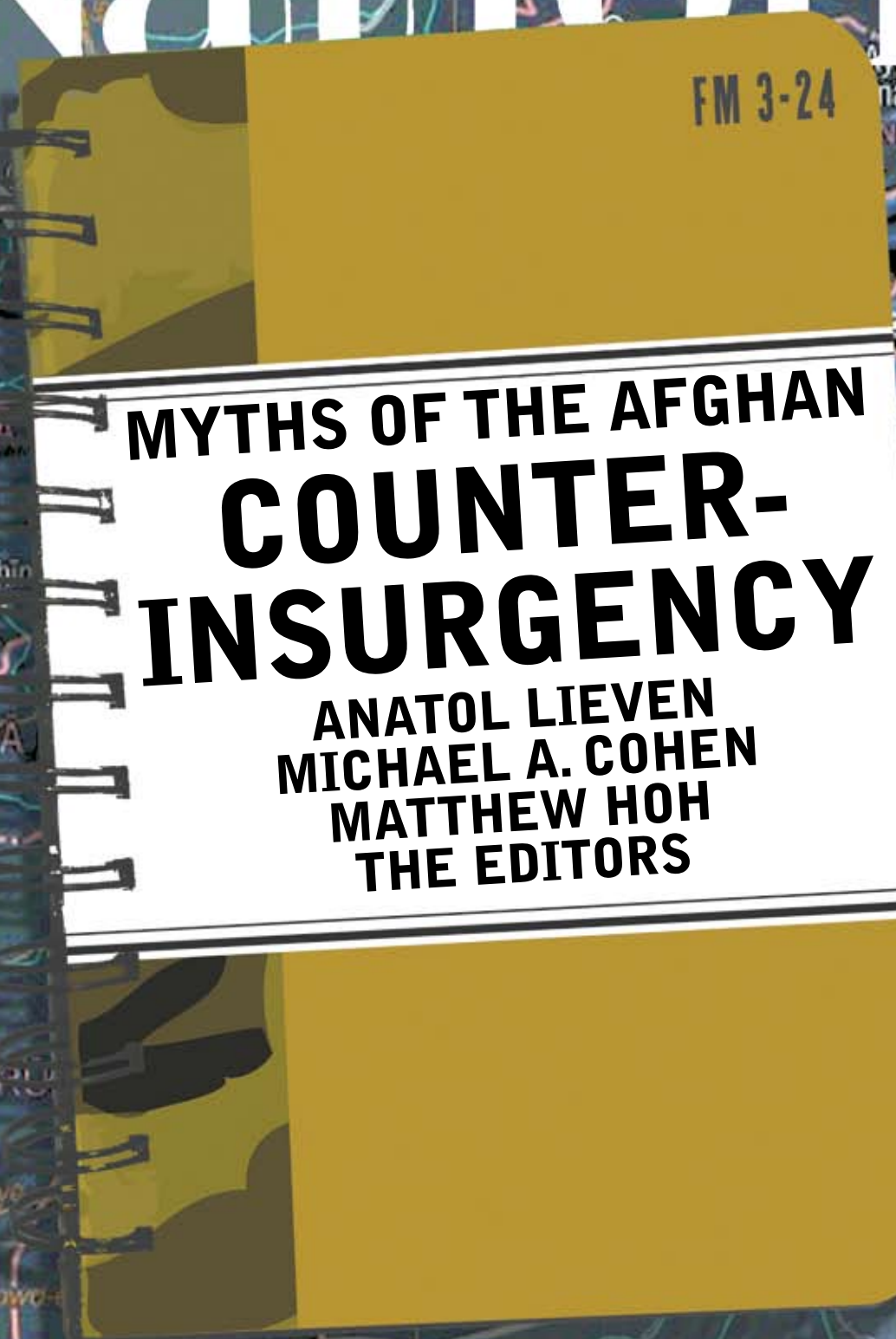

MYTHS OF THE AFGHAN COUNTER-INSURGENCY

ANATOL LIEVEN
MICHAEL A. COHEN
MATTHEW HOH
THE EDITORS

JANUARY 3, 2011
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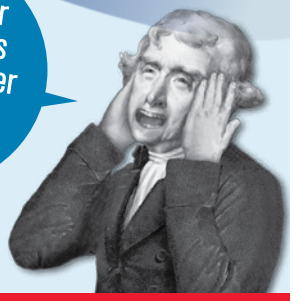
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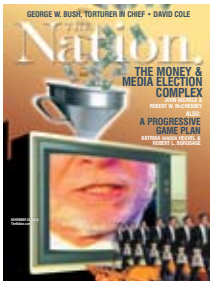

The Bucks Don't Stop Here

Austin, Tex.
"The hard truth is that we have a corporate class that funds electoral conflict for the purpose of forging a political class that will govern in its interest" is as brutally honest and accurate as is the entire article by John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney ["The Money & Media Election Complex," Nov. 29]. Yet a majority of voters would not understand its audacity and complexity, nor would they understand how their vote, based on negative TV ads, endangers our democracy. Do voters realize that their vote in 2012 could help disable our democracy? Do they understand they are voting for a plutocracy? This essay is too important and outstanding to keep within *The Nation*. It needs to be the basis of a push for campaign finance reform. I suggest a ban on political advertising on TV because it's dangerous to your health, like the ban on TV cigarette peddling.
Cyndi Collen

Corvallis, Ore.
John Nichols and Robert McChesney blast election campaign TV ads: "As ads become the primary source of political information, we create a politics based on lies or, at best…quarter-truths." Strong words. Their solution? More TV ads! "Free TV ads for every candidate on the ballot." Since, by the writers' account, TV campaign ads absorb two-thirds of all campaign funds, wouldn't the proper solution be a legal ban on those TV ads? TV campaign ads are already banned in England.

Let's think big. Repeal any First Amendment protection for election campaign ads on television, radio and billboards, and prohibit all such ads. Candidates could still use debates, newspaper, magazine and Internet ads, mailers, fliers, books and phone calls. This could reduce the amount of money any candidate needs by two-thirds. Citizens lacking wealth could run for major public office!
Leo W. Quirk

letters@thenation.com

'Don't Cry for Me': B. Obama

Mt. Lebanon, Pa.
Re William Greider's "Obama Without Tears" [Nov. 29]: my shoe leather is where my heart is. I am one of thousands who walked, and knocked, in the last two elections. I have been inspired by President Obama, but not lately. The president has changed from a transformational leader to mediator. When Wall Street went down, I wanted a president who would indict the perps while fixing the system. (W. didn't, but I thought Obama might.) Instead, his opening position was compromise. Compromise is necessary, but you often get the best deal by championing your values, defending the ideal and explaining the process to the faithful. You negotiate but assert that the dream shall never die.

We need candidate Obama back. Let someone else broker the deals. I didn't walk a hole in my shoe for a mediator. I sweated for the best, most inspiring leader since Bobby Kennedy.
Tom O'Brien

Santa Fe
I continue to be confounded by President Obama's inability to evidence real indignation against a know-nothing, do-nothing GOP. Perhaps he doesn't want to be perceived as an angry black man; but he is beginning to look more and more like Gen. George McClellan, whom Lincoln despaired of ever engaging the fight with the forces seeking to divide and conquer.

For far too long Obama has suppressed legitimate outrage in favor of lawyerly, overly conciliatory, above-the-fray detachment while the right seizes the narrative. For the sake of the country, "fired up and ready to go" from candidate Obama needs a revival from within the bruised-but-not-bowed presidential psyche.
Barbara Allen Kenney

Gwynedd, Pa.
Those of us who were moved by Obama the candidate and cheered him on to vic-

(continued on page 26)

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Military Madness

In announcing at the November NATO summit that US combat forces would remain in Afghanistan at least until 2014, President Obama has short-circuited a much-needed debate about his administration's strategic review. In so doing, the president has missed yet another chance to begin to end a war that has become an increasingly costly liability.

EDITORIAL

Advance reports of the review indicate that it will conclude that the surge has made progress in expanding security in the south and around Kabul and in training the Afghan army. But it will also make the case that much more needs to be done, as reflected by insurgent gains in the north and east and by the fact that the Afghan army is not yet able to operate independently of US forces.

Therein lies the problem. Given the corrupt and incompetent Afghan government and the ethnic and tribal divisions that afflict the country, there will always be more to do. Indeed, the war has taken on a life of its own, disconnected from any reasonable strategic goal. Over the course of Obama's short command, the mission has included "disrupting, dismantling and defeating Al Qaeda" as well as building up a more accountable government and reversing Taliban momentum. Now we may be seeing yet more mission creep, as evidence mounts that Gen. David Petraeus has abandoned his much-touted counterinsurgency strategy, aimed at protecting the population, for an aggressive warfighting strategy, aimed at inflicting massive losses on the Taliban (see Michael A. Cohen on page 17). This escalation comes as polling shows that a majority of Afghans want US troops out of their country as soon as possible.

The question we must ask is not how much progress we've made but why, after nine years, we are still in Afghanistan. Given the serious economic problems we face, the only justification for maintaining more than 100,000 troops and spending more than $120 billion a year would be that Afghanistan poses a national security threat that can be met only with such a large force. But this is not a war of necessity. By the government's own admission, there are at most some 100 Al Qaeda operatives in remote parts of Afghanistan, and the Afghan Taliban are largely a local movement, with little interest in global jihad. What remains of the old Al Qaeda leadership has long since decamped to Pakistan. In the meantime, the terrorist threat has metastasized into a many-celled franchise spread across several continents. Indeed, the greater danger today comes from a dispersed network of alienated people whose only initial connection to Afghanistan or Pakistan is anger at US killing of Muslims in Muslim lands. American safety therefore depends not on eliminating faraway Al Qaeda havens but on common-sense counterterrorist and homeland security measures of the kind that recently thwarted the bomb packages from Yemen.

Meanwhile, the increasingly bloody war in Afghanistan, along with the aggressive use of drone attacks in Pakistan, may have unintended consequences for our delicate relations with Pakistan. As Anatol Lieven argues on page 11, the greatest danger to Pakistan's stability comes from the prolonged US war, which deepens divisions in Pakistan and further weakens support for its fragile democratic government. And the destabilization of Pakistan has potentially devastating implications for regional security.

The Obama administration has thus made a grievous mistake in escalating the war. The Afghan crisis is at worst a regional problem that requires a regional,

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diplomatic solution. Matthew Hoh, a former Marine officer and State Department senior representative in Afghanistan who resigned in protest against the war in 2009 (see his interview with Barbara Koeppel on page 15), poses the dilemma sharply: "Is there acceptance among Americans that we are engaged in a generations-long conflict against a terrorist group that only has 1,000 or 2,000 followers around the world? And that it requires us to spend hundreds of billions of dollars, and have hundreds of thousands of marines and soldiers deployed worldwide in a perpetual war? It's absolute madness, but I'm afraid people are buying into it and not challenging it." It is clear from this current strategic review, as from earlier reviews, that the war will not end if left to the administration and the generals. It will end only when the public demands that it end. And that makes public opposition to the war critical.

The Cancún Compromise

"You have been negotiating all my life," 21-year-old Mima Haider of Lebanon told delegates at the United Nations climate negotiations in Cancún. "You cannot tell me you need more time." But that's pretty much what they did tell her, and the rest of us. True, some important agreements were reached in Cancún. Rich countries reaffirmed their legal obligation to help poor ones fight climate change, and even promised sizable sums toward that end. The Cancún Agreements oblige rich countries to contribute $30 billion in new aid between now and 2012—growing to $100 billion a year by 2020—to a Green Climate Fund. This fund will help developing countries reduce greenhouse gas emissions and install protections against floods, droughts and other climate impacts that disproportionately punish the global poor.

COMMENT

But on the key questions determining whether children in rich and poor countries alike will inherit a livable climate—how much will emissions be reduced, and when?—negotiators kicked the ball down the road. The Cancún text did recognize that "deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions are required…to hold the increase in global average temperature below 2 degrees Celsius [2C] above pre-industrial levels." And it is significant that, for the first time, developed countries will not be the only ones that must make cuts. In a major concession to Washington, developing countries—including China, India and other rising powers—will henceforth also be required to reduce emissions, if only to below business-as-usual trajectories. But these are general statements of intent. Decisions on implementation—how steep the cuts will be, how this burden will be shared between developed and developing countries, and how all this will be enforced—were explicitly put off until the next round of negotiations, scheduled for December 2011 in Durban, South Africa.

No wonder many media outlets chose the word "modest" to describe the Cancún deal. Still, it could have been much worse. Going into the talks, expectations were very low; outright failure seemed a possibility. That compromises were reached on a range of second-tier issues revived many participants' faith in the UN

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Noted.

GOP TO MINERS: DROP DEAD: In April, after an explosion at West Virginia's **Upper Big Branch** coal mine left twenty-nine miners dead, there was strong talk from Washington about accountability. Outrage grew when reporters discovered that the **Massey Energy**–owned mine had been cited thousands of times for safety violations, while CEO **Don Blankenship** postponed a comeuppance by miring nearly every violation in a broken appeals process.

All that tough talk has been forgotten now. On December 8, House labor committee chair **George Miller** made a last-ditch effort to pass mine safety legislation before the Republican takeover, using an expedited procedure that requires two-thirds support. The bill, named after the late Senator **Robert Byrd**, would have raised penalties for scofflaw mine operators, eased the process for shutting down the most dangerous mines and offered new protections for whistleblowers. If the law had been in place last spring, there's a decent chance the explosion would not have taken place; at Upper Big Branch, workers had complained of unsafe conditions for months.

Passage of the bill once seemed inevitable, but the **Chamber of Commerce** and **National Association of Manufacturers** warned Congress against voting for it. At one hearing, a Chamber representative, a former Bush Labor Department official, deplored the "adversarial relationship" it would create between regulators and mine operators and its "unduly punitive" penalties. Even though a majority in the House supported the measure, Republicans (all but one), joined by twenty-seven Democrats, had the numbers to kill the bill. The *New York Times* called the vote an insult to the memory of the fallen miners—and it was. It was also likely a death sentence for many more miners.

Meanwhile, West Virginia mining officials continue to investigate the Massey disaster. Blankenship, so talkative in opposing new mine safety legislation, has taken the Fifth. ESTHER KAPLAN

A REAL FILIBUSTER: Vermont Senator **Bernie Sanders**'s eight-and-a-half-hour floor speech on December 10—in which he challenged the deal to extend tax cuts for the rich—illustrated the positive power of the filibuster. But this tool has been abused in recent years. Sanders engaged in a traditional filibuster, going to the floor and holding forth. But most "filibusters" these days are acts of what the Brennan Center for Justice calls "procedural obstructionism." Instead of speeches—like Jimmy Stewart's in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*—today's filibusters merely exploit the rules to block debate, and they do it often. Historically it was rare to see even a handful of cloture votes during a Senate session—there was only one during **Lyndon Johnson**'s six years as Senate majority leader—but we now see dozens of them a year.

A new campaign, **Fix the Senate Now**, seeks to address the "back room deals, secret holds, and filibuster rules that allow a handful of senators to stop the rest from making any progress." Following a proposal by Oregon Senator **Jeff Merkley**, the campaign suggests changing filibuster rules in two specific ways. First, "Make the filibuster real. If one or more Senators want to filibuster a bill, they should be required to hold the floor and fight for what they believe in." Second, "Don't give Senators multiple chances to filibuster the same bill. In recent years, Republicans have regularly filibustered routine parliamentary steps, even on measures that virtually everyone agrees on." Merkley plans to propose these and other reforms when the new Senate is organized—and establishes its rules—in January. Follow the campaign at fixthesenatenow.org. JOHN NICHOLS

BRITISH CRACKDOWN: Student protests reached a crescendo in London on December 9 as members of Parliament voted to triple university tuition despite opposition from students, teachers and unions. Regrettably, most of the mainstream press chose to cover the demonstrations as an affront to power. The *New York Times* splashed **Prince Charles** and his wife, **Camilla**, on the front page, unhurt in their paint-bombed Rolls-Royce, and the accompanying article related the story of police officers injured in the violence, which provided a "disturbing backdrop to the day's political events."

The article neglected to mention the police brutality against a 20-year-old man, **Alfie Meadows**, who is fighting for his life after alleged truncheon blows to the head caused bleeding in the brain, and **Shiv Malik**, a freelance journalist who needed five stitches after similar mistreatment. A disabled protester, **Jody McIntyre**, was also pulled from his wheelchair and later thrown to the ground by police.

In the House of Commons, six Conservative MPs voted against their own party's bill, including **Julian Lewis**, who told the House, "I grew up in Swansea [in Wales] and went to the same [state] school as my father, Sam. The difference was that he had to leave at 14 to help his father as a tailor.... I can hear people talk about percentages until they are blue in the face...but they will not convince me that young people from poor backgrounds will not be deterred.... I would have been deterred, and I do not want others to be deterred." JENNIFER O'MAHONY

MILLENNIALS ON THE MARCH: At 26, Facebook's **Mark Zuckerberg** is the first member of the millennial generation to be named *Time* magazine's Person of the Year, but for almost everyone else in his cohort, the future is defined by turmoil and uncertainty. Weaned on the Internet, millennials will constitute 33 percent of the eligible electorate by 2016, coming of age in a political climate marked by never-ending gridlock and a prolonged recession that has shattered the myth of middle-class stability.

In response, the **Roosevelt Institute**—founded in 2004 as the first student-run policy organization in the United States—has released its "Blueprint for the Millennial America," a comprehensive outline of where this generation's political priorities lie. Its policy prescriptions include expanding college affordability, a restructuring of the economy to meaningfully redress global warming and some substantive means of reducing the millennials' staggering unemployment rate, which now exceeds 25 percent.

But more consequential, the institute has started work on a grassroots model for activism—"a structure that enables young people to break down the policymaking process into manageable pieces." Fittingly, you can learn more about the plan of action on the institute's newly minted Facebook page. MICHAEL TRACEY

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process. After the catastrophe in Copenhagen in 2009, when a majority of mainly developing countries angrily rejected a deal that the United States, China and other big emitters had hammered out in secret, the UN's role was in question. Some in rich countries complained that the multilateral, consensus-seeking approach was too unwieldy to make progress. Many in developing countries countered that only the UN process enabled democratic decision-making. In Cancún, thanks to the Mexican hosts' diplomatic skills, negotiations went more smoothly and yielded results, giving the UN process a new lease on life.

Those who see the Cancún glass as half full hope the trust and momentum achieved there will make it easier to tackle the knotty issues that await in Durban. As always, the dance of the two climate superpowers, the United States and China, will be crucial. After an acrimonious standoff in Copenhagen, both sides' negotiators showed surprising flexibility in Cancún. China accepted that it, too, had to limit emissions and even accepted a degree of outside monitoring. In a compromise proposed by India, projects to reduce emissions in developing countries financed by international sources will be internationally verified while domestic projects will only be domestically verified. For its part, the United States not only accepted the latter stipulation but agreed that rich countries must cut emissions more and sooner than developing ones, even as they supply $100 billion a year to the Green Climate Fund.

How rich countries envision finding that $100 billion is suggested by a little-noticed provision concerning deforestation. Many participants have cited the Cancún Agreements concerning REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) as another cause for optimism. After all, deforestation causes roughly the same amount of emissions globally as does transportation, and the agreements pledge to give developing countries financial incentives to leave forests standing. Where will the money for the developing countries come from? The Cancún text authorizes the use of "market-based mechanisms"—which is to say, cap and trade. Under cap and trade, polluters in rich countries would be credited for reducing emissions not because they burned less fossil fuel at home but because they paid to keep forests intact in developing countries. Given how unpopular cap and trade is on both the right and the left (and not only in the United States), more fights on this front seem certain before a final deal is reached in Durban.

Arguably the most important question left dangling after Cancún is the future of the Kyoto Protocol. The advantage of Kyoto from a scientific perspective is that it imposes mandatory rather than voluntary emissions reductions, at least on rich nations; developing nations are exempt on the grounds that overcoming poverty must be their first priority. Of course, the mandatory nature of Kyoto is precisely why the United States—alone among rich industrial countries—has refused to ratify it. In Cancún, other rich nations signaled that they've had enough. First Japan and then Russia and Canada announced that they would abandon the protocol if other big emitters—read, the United States and China—remain outside its purview. The Cancún Agreements, however, may have opened a door to resolving this dispute, for they oblige *all* nations to reduce future emissions. The challenge between now and next December is to translate that general principle into specific, proportional, binding targets for rich and poor countries alike and, much harder, generate the political pressure to compel national leaders to accept those targets.

A stiff challenge? No doubt, not least because the cuts countries have pledged so far fall well short of limiting a future temperature rise to 2C above preindustrial levels. Thus, future cuts will either have to be significantly larger or humanity will have to endure even higher temperatures and the stronger impacts they unleash—not a smart move. For years, a 2C rise has been seen as a relatively safe increase, but that is no longer so. A landmark British Royal Society study released on the eve of the Cancún conference found that the latest scientific assessments project "a significant increase in the severity of some impacts for a 2C temperature rise." As a result, 2C "now represents a threshold, not between acceptable and dangerous climate change, but between dangerous and 'extremely dangerous' climate change." In short, our civilization is already locked into a very perilous future, and governments will have to go well beyond what is "politically realistic" if we are to avoid utter catastrophe. As the 21-year-old from Lebanon told the Cancún delegates, we shouldn't have waited so long to get started.

MARK HERTSGAARD

Mark Hertsgaard is The Nation*'s environment correspondent. His new book is* Hot: Living Through the Next Fifty Years on Earth.

Calvin Trillin, Deadline Poet

Defender of His People

"The emigration of Jews from the Soviet Union is not an objective of American foreign policy. And if they put Jews into gas chambers in the Soviet Union, it is not an American concern." —Henry Kissinger
from newly released Oval Office tapes from the Nixon administration

He would have fit in well at State
In nineteen hundred thirty-eight.

Health Reform Teach-In

President Obama needs to become the educator in chief on healthcare reform. And he should start by telling Americans something most of them do not know: he and the Democratic Congress have saved the most popular healthcare program in American history, Medicare.

The White House should begin a campaign to remind Americans that because of the healthcare reforms Obama signed in 2010, Medicare is securely funded and monitored. The ad-

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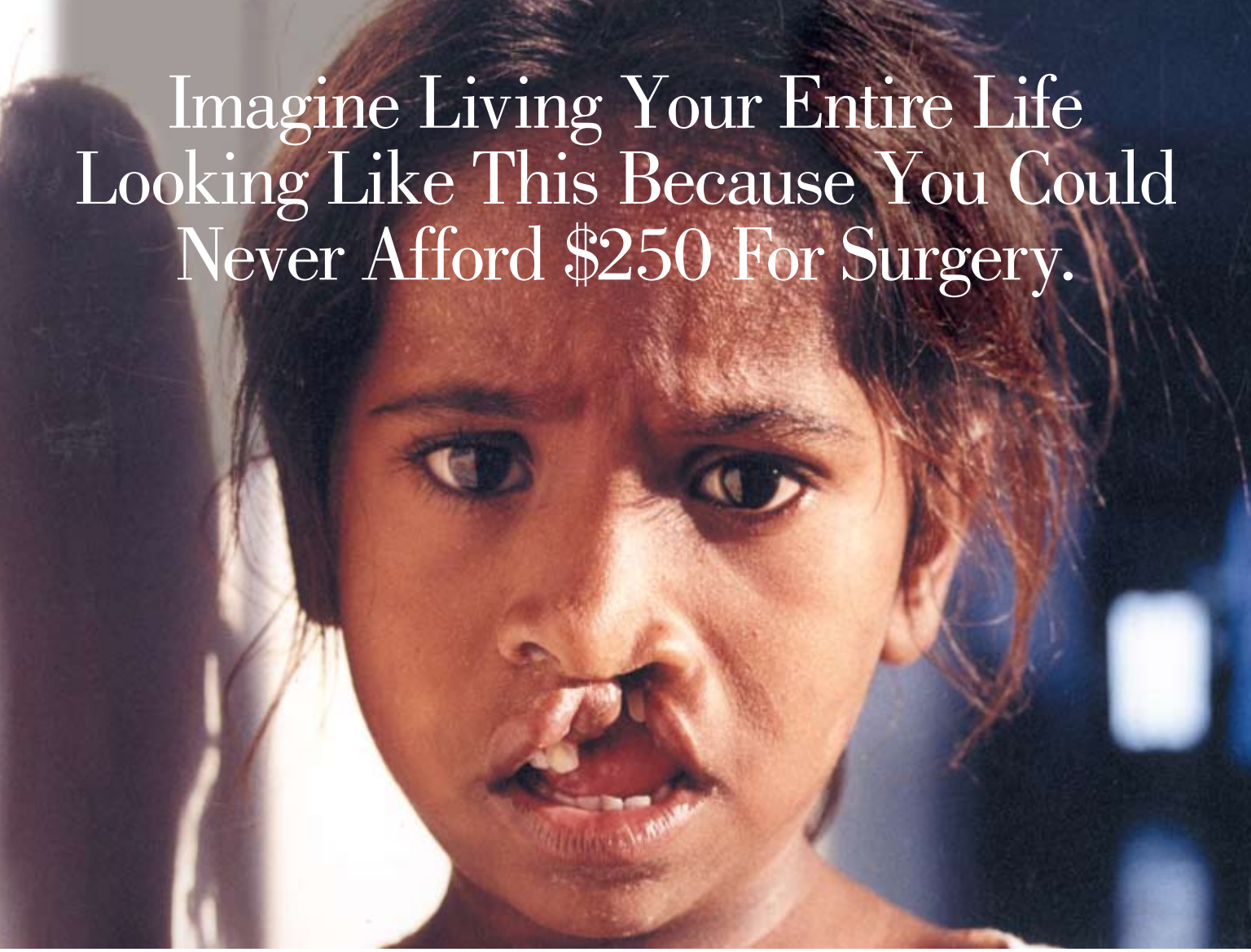

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ministration should also point out that the $455 billion reduction of Medicare spending will mostly affect unfair and wasteful taxpayer subsidies of private plans like Medicare Advantage. But it should be prepared to address other legitimate fears. Isn't Medicare facing bankruptcy? Is this the start of formal rationing? How is the Independent Payment Advisory Board going to monitor and advise on cost control? How will state insurance exchanges lower costs and maintain quality?

These questions are important and must be dealt with in the implementation of the law. The Obama-led program could educate the public with town meetings, media briefings, interactive websites, blogs, TV and radio shows, and fireside chats. And the president should be backed up by the many allies for healthcare reform, including labor, some physician and hospital organizations, some insurance companies, senior groups and private-sector corporate leaders, MoveOn.org and doctor coalitions.

COMMENT

Why start with Medicare? Because it's the easiest subject on which to begin educating people about what the administration has accomplished. The reform legislation is voluminous and complicated. Could it have been simpler? Maybe. But this is the best our officials could do after close to a year of deliberation.

Healthcare reform is worth defending, and the president had better do it fast. Why? Because it's in jeopardy. The Republican victory in November was achieved in part by a commitment to repeal "Obamacare." The administration was confident the litigation by the state attorneys general was frivolous. But in December the Virginia attorney general succeeded in getting a federal judge to rule it unconstitutional for the government to compel Americans to buy health insurance. If the Supreme Court concurs, universal coverage and cost control will be severely jeopardized. Republicans have already introduced a bill in the House to repeal the law. If that is not successful, they threaten to "starve" it by not appropriating start-up costs.

In addition to the loss of the House, Democrats suffered major setbacks in the states, with Republicans now controlling twenty-nine governorships. Eighteen state legislatures converted from Democratic to Republican. These developments are critical in the implementation of the reform, since the law assumes cooperation by state governments. Those states dominated by the GOP may begin to thwart implementation.

What caused the erosion in support for this historic legislation only months after passage? Exit interviews November 2 showed a slight majority of voters in favor, but 58 percent of senior voters wanted it repealed. First, Democrats were unwilling to defend and promote the law in the campaign. Second, and more important, Republicans shrewdly demonized the legislation as "socialized" medicine and an unconstitutional government takeover of healthcare. Presidents Roosevelt and Johnson faced similar opposition to Social Security in 1935 and Medicare in 1965. But they educated the public about the programs and the need for higher taxes to operate them. Even though there were national elections before implementation, both laws easily survived without change.

The Obama administration, national Democrats and advocates of reform have retreated from this monumental law. They have hardly mentioned it since the midterm elections. It appears the strategy has been to hunker down and quietly move implementation forward for the next four years, when full coverage of 32 million Americans will take effect.

That approach is foolish and dangerous.

It's foolish because educating Americans about healthcare is easier than politicians think. In 1968 I started, and ran, one of the first community health centers in the country. Many Republicans and physicians branded it socialized medicine. We were concerned about continued federal-state support. However, with extensive education and demonstrable results, the Republicans under President George W. Bush doubled funding. Now the Obama plan doubles the number of Americans who will be served by community health centers, to 40 million.

I have fought these battles for a long time—as a physician, as a two-term mayor of Louisville, Kentucky, as a county executive and as a candidate for the US Senate. I know which fights we can win, even in red states. And I know that a campaign focused on what this administration has already done to preserve and expand Medicare, along with universal health coverage for all Americans, is a winner. I also know that in this politically volatile moment, it's dangerous to avoid the fight. The question is not, Can the Obama administration win this battle? It *must* win it if it is to have a second term. If the Republicans want to repeal healthcare reform, they will have to win the presidency. Republican strategists have looked at how they were able to defeat "Hillarycare" and then win control of Congress in 1994. They think defeating "Obamacare" will lead to capturing the White House in 2012. And they may be right.

President Obama can do right by the country and by his own political future if he begins a national conversation about healthcare reform. He should open the campaign right away, at a press conference next to the national Christmas tree, surrounded by some of the hundreds of children who are now getting coverage despite pre-existing conditions; by older children who will remain on their parents' plan until age 26; and by seniors who are having the "doughnut hole" closed on their Medicare prescription plans and getting coverage on preventive measures like mammographies and colonoscopies as of January 1. It is time for Obama to use the bully pulpit.

HARVEY SLOANE

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Eric Alterman

What's the Story, Mr. President?

Early in 2005, the newly seated junior senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, invited me to join him for dinner with a small group of the heads of Washington's most influential progressive organizations. It was a pretty depressed group, given the outcome of the previous election. This exciting young African-American's inspiring keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, coupled with his subsequent landslide Senate victory, were pretty much the only good news anybody had seen in the preceding year's politics.

The contents of what was said during that meeting are off the record, but I can say that after being seated next to Obama for the course of the evening, I came away deeply impressed by his poise, self-confidence and intelligence. In profound contrast to virtually every Democratic politician with national ambitions at the time, Obama evinced not the slightest concern about his ability to connect with culturally conservative and deeply religious Americans. But he was worried about his own—and his party's—inability to offer a coherent response to the economic transformation under way in America. Long before the Wall Street crash, when housing prices were still high and most middle-class Americans felt themselves to be on relatively secure ground, Obama was looking for a way to address the problems of workers being undercut and eventually displaced by global competition. He knew how to talk to people in church; it was outside the locked factory gates in towns where the jobs had moved overseas that he felt himself stymied.

I don't really remember if anyone had anything useful to offer that night, but if so it wasn't much. I do know that if you ask most Americans what conservatives believe will fix whatever's wrong with America at any given time, they can give you a simple, coherent response: lower taxes, less government, more "freedom." It may be wrong. It may benefit only the rich. But it is easy to understand and repeat, particularly when billions of dollars have been invested to make it appear plausible.

Indeed, the entire edifice of supply-side economics was constructed with this goal in mind. Neoconservative pundit Irving Kristol, *Wall Street Journal* editorial page editor Robert Bartley and former Treasury Secretary William Simon, among others, made this their cause throughout much of the 1970s and '80s, with often astonishing results. They helped channel hundreds of millions of dollars, later mushrooming into billions, into the newly created conservative counterestablishment. These groups and others championed the arguments of Austrian economist Friedrich von Hayek and his American counterpart, monetarist Milton Friedman, to replace the global Keynesian consensus with their own. Their ideas were further disseminated by a rash of new quasi-academic and political journals and publishing houses, later augmented by an entire alternative media structure we now understand to be a natural part of our politics and culture.

It was in this period, as intellectual historian Daniel Rodgers explains in his forthcoming *Age of Fracture*, that the "near global dominance of the new political economy" became evident. "Faith in the wisdom and the efficiency of markets, disdain for big government taxation, spending, and regulation, reverence for a globalized world of flexible labor pools, free trade and free-floating capital" became the dominant ideology of American politics. This helps explain why, just recently, in the midst of America's most severe economic downturn since the Depression, no less influential a figure than Federal Reserve chair Ben Bernanke felt compelled to assert to a gathering of the top members of his profession, "I grasp the mantle of Milton Friedman.… I think we are doing everything Milton Friedman would have us do." It is also why the Republicans appear so confident in demanding a tax "compromise" with the president in which they are happy to assign $133 billion (out of a total of $347 billion) to fewer than 5 million Americans—the 5 million who are already lucky enough to be earning more than $250,000 a year.

It's not merely that conservatives are better at selling their product, or that they happen to have an easier—and undoubtedly simpler—ideological product to sell. It's that they know what they are selling. Liberals in general and Obama in particular cannot say the same. Much of what Tea Party candidates claimed about the world and the global economy during the 2010 elections would have earned their adherents a well-deserved F in any freshman economics (or earth science) class. But it was a story that enough voters could connect to their circumstances and fears to allow themselves to trust these charlatans with the future of their government. Liberals do not appear to address potential solutions with anything like the far right's aura of God-given self-confidence. That is undoubtedly a disadvantage with some voters, but it is one that could be countered with a plausible story about how progressive policies and plans can be expected to provide citizens (and their children) with a brighter future than the one they feel they face today.

To achieve this, however, will require considerable reimagination regarding our story about how the world works and America's place in its future. Obama told such a story as a candidate during the 2008 election. But as president, having (understandably) lost the magic of that moment, and facing a much graver crisis than anyone imagined at the time, he had no story or even theory to explain what has gone wrong and how to fix it. There are more people at Obama's table offering ideas than there were five years ago, but when it came to facing up to the Republicans' threat to force a double-dip recession if they didn't get their millionaires' tax cut, they still amounted to nothing. And therein lies our fundamental problem. ■

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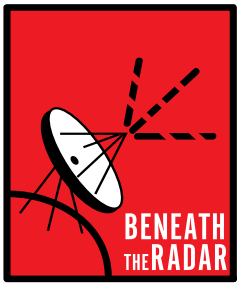
Gary Younge

How to Be President in a Fact-Free America

I am black and British. This is not a lifestyle choice. My parents were part of the great migration from the global South when the empire, demographically speaking, struck back. It's the historical hand I was dealt. And it's not a bad hand. These are not the most interesting things about me. But at certain moments in the eight years I've lived in the United States, they have been the most confusing to others.

Shortly before I first came here some fifteen years ago, I asked a local how people would react to a black man with a British accent. "When they hear your voice, they'll add twenty points to your IQ," he said. "But when they see your face, they won't."

With some white conservatives, I've noticed, the gulf between what they see and what they hear can widen into an unbridgeable chasm. The affect of Englishness—hauteur, refined behavior and aristocracy (none of which I possess)—is something they aspire to, or at least appreciate. Blackness, on the other hand, is not.



And so when I introduce myself as a journalist from England I occasionally prompt a moment of synaptic dysfunction. The overwhelming majority get over it. But every now and then they say, "Really? I don't hear an accent."

"If you beat your head against the wall," the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once wrote, "it is your head that breaks, not the wall."

To avoid an almighty headache I try to shut the conversation down: "Well, I can't explain that. But let's get on with the interview."

But they won't let it go. "Where in England?" "Were you born there?" "How long have you been here?"

The sad truth is that even when presented with concrete and irrefutable evidence, some people still prefer the reality they want over the one they actually live in. Herein lies one of the central problems of engaging with those on the American right. Cocooned in their own mediated ecosystem, many of them are almost unreachable through debate; the air is so fetid, reasonable discussion cannot breathe. You can't win an argument without facts, and we live in a moment when whether you're talking about climate change or WMD, facts seem to matter less and less.

I'm not referring to false consciousness here (insisting that people don't know what's best for them, which doesn't seek to understand but to infantilize them) but instead the persistent, stubborn, willful refusal to acknowledge basic, known, verifiable facts and the desire to make misinformation the cornerstone of an agenda.

The examples are legion. Most of those who believe that Obama is a Muslim (roughly one in three Republicans) also loathe his former pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. But Muslims don't have pastors. They also claim that Obama's 1981 trip to Pakistan as a student is evidence of his Islamic militancy and his dubious beginnings: he must have used a foreign passport, since the country was on a "no-travel list" at the time. It wasn't. In fact, in August that year the US consul general in Lahore encouraged Americans to visit, and before that, on June 14, the *New York Times* Travel section had run a 3,400-word piece explaining that Americans could get thirty-day visas at airports and border crossings.

That these falsehoods are proxies for racism is true but beside the point. After all, the right Swiftboated John Kerry and Whitewatered the Clintons before him. Obama's race and ethnicity merely provide an easier target, and the growing strength of Fox, the web and talk-radio mean that these slings and arrows travel faster and farther. But if Obama can't convince the right of these basic facts, what hope does he have of persuading them to support his economic and foreign policies?

The principle of compromise is fine and, given the recent election, inevitable. But you can negotiate only with those who engage in good faith. In the absence of that, Obama should expend less effort trying to win the right over and more trying to win us back.

For these fabrications gain currency only when real change proves elusive. The number who believe Obama is a Muslim has leapt 50 percent since before his election, during which time the economy has lagged. Meanwhile, whatever the inadequacies of the healthcare reform, once it passed all talk of "death panels" ceased.

Faced with the option of believing something that's not true or gaining tangible benefits like a job or healthcare, most people will take the latter. However petulant, ignorant or gullible people might be, most would prefer to hold on to their jobs, homes and health than their illusions. The problem is that Obama's failure to deliver gives little incentive to exchange fiction for fact.

Now more than ever the only way for Obama to bring about progressive change is by mobilizing his base. If the right can surge when Democrats have the presidency and both houses of Congress, there is no reason the left can't just because the GOP has the House. Indeed, now that Republicans have some power, they're easier to expose. That's what makes Obama's "compromise" on tax cuts such a strategic blunder. There will rarely be a better opportunity to lay bare the GOP's class priorities (let alone the sketchiness of its deficit-busting credentials).

"We are all capable of believing things which we know to be untrue," wrote George Orwell in his essay "In Front of Your Nose." "And then, when we are finally proved wrong, impudently twisting the facts so as to show that we were right. Intellectually, it is possible to carry on this process for an indefinite time: the only check on it is that sooner or later a false belief bumps up against solid reality, usually on a battlefield."

Obama needs to get out there and fight. ■

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The Nation.

HOW THE AFGHAN COUNTERINSURGENCY THREATENS PAKISTAN

ANATOL LIEVEN

Our war has radicalized Pakistanis, turning many against the West and their own government.

By now, almost all the likely outcomes of US strategy in Afghanistan are bad ones. They range from unending civil war, with government forces barely managing to hold their own against the Taliban, to de facto partition of the country. There is a chance that the Taliban would accept a settlement involving a timetable for the complete withdrawal of US forces and a neutral central government of respected Muslim figures, together with de facto Taliban control of the Pashtun heartland in the south and Western economic aid. In return they would have to promise to exclude Al Qaeda and crack down on opium cultivation in their areas (as they did in 2000).

Given that most ordinary Taliban fighters, as expressed in a survey organized by Graeme Smith of the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, want the exit of Western troops and a Muslim (but not necessarily Taliban) government, it's likely that the rejection of such terms by the Taliban leadership would undermine their support on the ground. This solution would, however, be heavily dependent on the help of Pakistan as a mediator and as one of the regional guarantors of the subsequent settlement.

The top leadership of the Afghan Taliban is based in Pakistani Baluchistan under the protection of Pakistani military intelligence, and Pakistan has prevented the United States from launching drone attacks on them there (in contrast with the intensive campaign against targets in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas to the north). Taliban forces use Pakistani territory for rest and recuperation, with the support of the local Pashtun population. Pakistan also has close ties to the two other Afghan Pashtun Islamist forces allied to the Taliban, the Hizb-e-Islami of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Haqqani network in the Afghan region of Greater Paktika. All of this gives Pakistan considerable influence over the Afghan Taliban—though it must be stressed that this influence is also limited. Any settlement brokered by Pakistan would have to be one the Taliban could accept without humiliation.

But if Pakistan is vital to a settlement, Pakistan is also vital in itself. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the survival of Pakistan, not Afghanistan, is the most important issue for Western and global security in that region. With six times Afghanistan's population, plus nuclear weapons, a highly trained 500,000-man army and a huge diaspora (especially in Britain), Pakistan would increase the international terrorist threat by orders of magnitude if it collapsed. There is a widespread (though exaggerated) view in the West that the weakness of the Pakistani state and the strength of Islamist support makes the country's collapse a real possibility. Leaving aside the danger (as exposed by WikiLeaks) of nuclear materials and skills reaching terrorist groups, the disintegration of the Pakistani army, with its highly trained engineers and anti-aircraft forces, would vastly increase the "conventional" terrorist threat to India and the West.

It was therefore with horror that I recently heard that the diminished threat from Al Qaeda means that some Western security officials are suggesting that the West can afford to put much more pressure on Islamabad to attack Taliban strongholds in Pakistan's border region, even though this may lead to greater destabilization within Pakistan. This is lunatic reasoning. The diminished power of Al Qaeda should be cause for the United States and NATO to find ways to withdraw from Afghanistan, not step up the fight against the Taliban—since it was to fight Al Qaeda that we went there in the first place. As for the terrorist threat to the West, this has never come from the Afghan Taliban—but it increasingly comes from the Pakistani Taliban and their allies, as the case of attempted Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad demonstrates.

Unfortunately, the current US strategy is headed in the opposite direction from using Pakistan to broker a settlement, and toward an intensified fight against the Taliban and intensified pressure on Pakistan. Even worse, there are barely the rudiments of a Plan B if that strategy fails. If it proves impossible

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to strengthen the Afghan National Army sufficiently within the next two years, the options will be stark: either US forces will have to fight on in Afghanistan indefinitely or they will have to accept the probable loss of the south and east of the country and either unending civil war or de facto partition through bloody war rather than negotiated agreement. Among other things, all these options will be bad for Pakistan, especially if India is drawn into much greater support for the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan. This would in effect lead to an Indo-Pakistani proxy war in Afghanistan.

It is worth looking closely at Soviet strategy in Afghanistan, for the current US approach is a variant of that strategy, albeit with serious—and potentially disastrous—differences. This is to build up the Afghan army to the point where it can hold the main population centers against the insurgents, even as the United States and NATO try to break off as many of those insurgents as possible through a mixture of bribery and military pressure.

This is not in itself a mistaken approach. After all, Soviet strategy succeeded. Backed by Soviet airpower, the Afghan army the Soviets left behind inflicted a shattering defeat on the mujahedeen in Jalalabad in the spring of 1989 (I was there on the mujahedeen side, as a young journalist for the *Times* of London). And with the Soviets gone, the nationalist element in hostility to the Kabul regime diminished, as educated and urban Afghans began to focus on what a victory of fanatical and brutalized rural guerrillas would mean for them.

The Afghan communist regime actually outlived the Soviet Union, collapsing only when Soviet subsidies ended. If one assumes that, following its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States is not going to imitate the Soviet Union by abandoning its global role, adopting communism and disintegrating as a state, it is by no means implausible to imagine that the Afghan army, backed by US arms, money and airpower and facing a divided opposition, could hold off the Taliban after US ground forces withdraw.

There are, however, immense problems, moral and practical, with this approach, and with how it is being pursued in detail by the US forces. Equally important, not merely does the United States not possess a Plan B but much of what the US military is doing will make the creation of a viable Plan B very difficult.

The moral problem is that under this strategy the guerrilla war in Afghanistan will go on indefinitely, albeit perhaps—but only perhaps—at a gradually diminishing rate of violence. There will be no incentive for the Taliban leadership or their hardline followers to reach a settlement; and a Kabul regime that is bound to be more and more dominated by the military is also highly unlikely to seek such a settlement. Moreover, as long as the counterinsurgency continues, the Taliban will have every incentive to go on working with Al Qaeda and terrorist groups in Pakistan, which can provide them with limited but useful expertise in everything from the construction of IEDs to medical services.

Equally important, the present Afghan state and army suffer from very important weaknesses compared with the Soviet-backed regime. Put simply, the Soviets inherited the still recognizable core of the old Afghan royal state and army as these had existed since the 1880s, together with their tradition of defending the cities and centers of government against a variety of tribal and religious rebels. Moreover, the old army was chiefly Pashtun in composition, and the man the Soviets chose to take over the state they left behind, Najibullah Khan, was a strongly Pashtun figure with prestige among some of the Pashtun tribes.

In 2001 the United States smashed the Taliban quasi state, leaving Afghanistan essentially with no state, and no armed forces but the overwhelmingly non-Pashtun militias of the Northern Alliance. Although efforts to develop the army and bring more Pashtuns into it have been moderately successful, only a very small proportion of soldiers are from the southern areas that are the Taliban's stronghold. Whether the Afghan army will be able to hold the towns in these areas after the United States leaves is therefore highly questionable.

US airstrikes and assassinations are killing some of the very Taliban commanders who might be persuaded to abandon the struggle.

Finally, in one critical respect US strategy is out of step with Soviet strategy, as well as with Afghan tradition. This is in Washington's insistence that "reconciliation" requires Taliban commanders to leave the Taliban publicly, submit to the regime of Hamid Karzai and the "Afghan Constitution," renounce violence and lay down their arms. In the vast majority of cases, this is simply not going to happen. It is too humiliating, and in the event of a Taliban victory it would be an automatic death sentence. Meanwhile—as leading Karzai government officials have repeatedly indicated—US airstrikes and Special Forces assassinations are killing some of the very Taliban commanders who might be persuaded to abandon the struggle, even if they will never formally surrender.

The Soviets, like the British before them, pursued a very different and much more Afghan approach: instead of paying mujahedeen commanders to change sides publicly, they paid them to pretend to fight, or to fight to a limited extent in some places while keeping key communications routes open. This strategy was pursued by the Kabul regime before and after the Soviet withdrawal, using Soviet money. Such deals were an open secret when I traveled in Afghanistan with the mujahedeen, and at one point or another they were made by many of the leading mujahedeen commanders. By contrast, in the analysis of two leading younger experts on the Taliban, Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn (in a forthcoming book, *The Enemy We Created: The Myth of a Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970–2010*),

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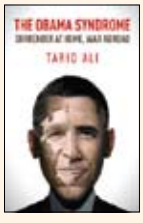

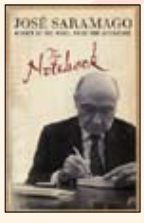

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the present strategy of killing midlevel Taliban commanders only clears the way for younger and far more radical figures to take their place.

If the United States continues this strategy indefinitely, the consequences for Pakistan could be dire. It has been argued (by the British military chief, Gen. Sir David Richards, for example, in *Prospect* magazine) that it is necessary to defeat the Afghan Taliban in order to protect Pakistan from Islamist extremism. The truth is almost exactly the opposite. More than any other factor, it is our campaign in Afghanistan that has radicalized Pakistanis and turned many of them not only against the West but against their own government and ruling system. In the worst case, the consequence of Western actions could be to destroy Pakistan as a state and produce a catastrophe that would reduce the problems in Afghanistan to insignificance by comparison.

The great majority of Pakistanis see our presence in Afghanistan as closely akin to that of the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1989.

Western military forces are seen by the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis with whom I have spoken over the past three years as engaged in an illegal occupation. The Pakistani government's cooperation with the United States is seen as a deep national humiliation and a betrayal of fellow Muslims. I do not endorse these views myself, but it is essential to recognize just how deep and widespread they are, and that a fateful symmetry is at work: while Western officials and journalists complain constantly that the Pakistani army is not doing enough to help the United States in Afghanistan, Pakistan's population regards it as doing far too much.

To put it at its bluntest, most Pakistanis see our presence in Afghanistan as closely akin to that of the Soviets from 1979 to 1989, and resistance to us as closely akin to the resistance of those days, and equally legitimate. These feelings are held not just by Islamists but by those Pakistanis—the great majority of the population—who have no desire to see a Taliban-style regime in their country; just as Pakistanis in the 1980s who sympathized with the Afghan mujahedeen had no desire to see such forces rule Pakistan. In other words, sympathy for the Afghan Taliban by no means necessarily equates to sympathy for the Pakistani Taliban. I have found the former sympathy among educated people in Karachi who detest the Taliban's social program but who are prepared to allow the Afghan Taliban at least some legitimacy as a "resistance movement."

In the Pashtun areas of Pakistan, the consequence first of the anti-Soviet war in the 1980s and now of the anti-American war has been to weaken still further the effectiveness and meaning of the frontier dividing the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is this ethno-religious solidarity, more than continuing support by the Pakistani state, that is providing the Afghan Taliban with their bases inside Pakistan. This support from large elements of the Pakistani population will continue as long as Western soldiers are present in Afghanistan. Their presence, as well as US drone strikes on targets in Pakistan, also helps legitimize the campaign of the Pakistani Taliban against the Pakistani state. Since the survival of that state is a US interest that vastly outweighs anything that might happen in Afghanistan, it follows that the US goal should be to reduce that presence as soon as this can be managed, not to follow a strategy that risks prolonging it indefinitely.

If we are going to start talking to Mullah Omar and the Taliban leadership, we need to start doing so now—not in the expectation that this will lead to an early settlement but in the knowledge derived from all previous experiences that such negotiations typically last for years before reaching a conclusion. It will take some time for positions to become clear and requisite levels of trust to be created. In such negotiations intermediaries are also typically required—which, under the circumstances, can only be Pakistan. American and NATO troops should fight on to defend their existing positions and buy time for the Afghan army to develop, but attacks on Taliban commanders and drone strikes in Pakistan should be drastically scaled back. Above all, there should be no extension of these attacks to new areas of Pakistan in an effort to kill Mullah Omar and other elements of the Taliban leadership, since one cardinal principle of negotiations is that you cannot try to kill the person with whom you are negotiating.

Of course, this approach may not work. The Taliban may prove too fanatical and ambitious, and it may prove impossible to persuade three other key players to accept such a settlement. These include Hamid Karzai, who would have to step down to make way for a neutral Afghan leader (unless, of course, negotiations drag on till 2014, when he is due to leave office); the commanders of the Afghan National Army, who would have to accept a purely token military presence in most Pashtun areas; and the US Army, which would have to accept something well short of victory. And regarding this third element, let us face facts: the US military command has great political power in Washington, which will constrain the options of both Democrats and Republicans on Afghanistan and other issues.

However, something short of victory does not have to mean open defeat and humiliation, in the style of Saigon in 1975. If this can be avoided, then other scenarios can be presented as at least qualified US successes, above all if they involve Taliban commitments against terrorism and heroin. Intelligent and candid US commanders already know that they cannot "win" in any traditional sense; but they are determined not to lose—and rightly so. Americans should not wish their armed forces to be led by quitters. The trick will be in the public presentation of any settlement.

Behind all these questions lies once again the issue of Pakistan's role, Pakistan's future and the US role in that future. Since our options for coercing Pakistan are so limited—at least, without actions that would risk destroying Pakistan and involving us in far worse disasters—we should try to make the best of an admittedly very difficult situation and seek Pakistan's help in finding a settlement to the Afghanistan conflict. ■

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Matthew Hoh's Afghanistan: An Insider Talks

Matthew Hoh has impeccable establishment credentials. From 2004 to 2007 he served as a Defense Department civilian on a reconstruction team and then as a Marine company commander in Iraq. In 2009 he was the State Department's senior representative in Afghanistan's Zabul province and political officer in Nangarhar province, areas of fierce fighting against the Taliban insurgency. But in September 2009 he resigned his post to protest the war. In 2010 investigative journalist Barbara Koeppel interviewed Hoh for The Nation *(for the full interview, go to thenation.com). Why did this official with a promising career ahead of him take one giant step—out? "I had to. I just couldn't stand the BS of it anymore."*

Barbara Koeppel: The "BS of it"?

Matthew Hoh: The way certain issues are presented. The main ones are about why we're there: that the Taliban created the conflict, that the US presence there is serving to stabilize the country, that Karzai and the US have wanted to negotiate and the Taliban haven't, that we're winning the war with our counterinsurgency strategy, that we're reducing corruption.

Who has and hasn't wanted to negotiate? It seems the US is now promoting talks.

This is new and good. What's maddening is that we could have negotiated earlier, even in 2005.

Why do we support talks now?

Because the timing fits with our two scenarios. The administration and military both wanted the war to end, but the military didn't want to be seen as "losing" Afghanistan, though everyone knows it's a stalemate or worse. Now General Petraeus says we've made progress and can negotiate. The administration wanted to stay for political reasons, to win what they call the "right" war, and do it closer to the 2012 elections. It wanted to prove Democrats are tough and the president can say, "We gave the generals the extra troops, they beat the Taliban and we can withdraw."

Are the scenarios in writing?

No. People were too savvy to do that.

Since the generals got the extra troops—21,000 in spring 2009 and 30,000 approved last December—why didn't they say a few months later that they won and negotiate?

It didn't fit the timeline. Also, they had to stay long enough to make it plausible. And people don't have a way to know what's really happening.

Why not?

Who will tell them? It's dangerous for reporters to go out alone, so they embed with troops. Some journalists are good, but most don't ask the right questions. They only look at tactical issues, like how many Afghan forces we've trained. For the bigger picture, reporters are briefed at headquarters by people like me—civilian or military—who do dog-and-pony shows. We also showed them to Congressional delegations, administration or military staff, development firms and think tanks.

Dog-and-pony shows?

Windshield tours to areas of progress, and PowerPoint presentations that are tailored, depending on the visitor. But the briefings are almost always rosy, acknowledging some difficulties but predicting success. If delegations go out, we take them to what you can call Potemkin villages. These are places we *want* people to see, like a road we built. The presentations are for Congress. You're not going to tell those funding the war that things aren't going well.

What about the Taliban? The US said the Taliban didn't want to negotiate.

This is just not true. Quetta Shura's website had propaganda but also stated its goals—ending the occupation and governing its areas without interference. The second-largest group, Hizb-e-Islami, took a fifteen-point peace plan to Kabul after we pulled out some troops from their areas. They said they wanted new elections, for the government to remain in place and their fighters to join Afghan security forces. It wasn't perfect, but it was a start.

What about US claims that we're winning the war with COIN [the counterinsurgency strategy]?

Our troops are getting killed in record numbers, and roadside bombs and assassinations have nearly doubled since 2009. There's no link between the $336 billion we've spent for the troops—and we're adding another $119 billion in 2011—and increased support for the Pashtuns who make up the bulk of the support for the Taliban. We've also spent over $50 billion for development and to train Afghan forces. Show me one area where, because of our development spending, we've decreased the conflict, decreased support for the Taliban or increased support for the Karzai government. You can't.

What effect has COIN had?

Afghanistan is swimming in money, which not only hasn't ended the war but prolongs it, because everyone's chasing it. If you're getting rich and buying mansions in Dubai, why reform the government, have a negotiated settlement or peace? It also *causes* corruption. Government officials take 10 to 40 percent. Next, local power brokers—who often include people we call the Taliban—get their share. The last 10 to 40 percent goes to those who do construction.

What should the US do now?

We have to address the political cause of the conflict or we'll never negotiate a settlement. The Afghanistan Study Group's recommendations state that Afghans have to reconcile their differences among themselves. Also, that Afghanistan's neighbors—Pakistan, India, Iran and others like Russia and China—have to see peace talks as reflecting their interests. If they don't, they'll sabotage the process. Until now, Pakistan and India haven't been willing to take part. That's why the US must push for and lead the talks—to bring them to the table.

This article was supported by the Henry Demarest Lloyd Fund at the Center for Investigative Reporting.

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Tossing the Afghan COIN

The US military's reinvented counterinsurgency turns out to be the same old brutal game.

by MICHAEL A. COHEN

As long as there has been war, as long as one nation has sought to impose its military will on another, there have been insurgents… and there have also been counterinsurgents.

It was the ancient Romans who popularized what has become an oft-imitated means of dealing with recalcitrant and subjugated peoples—the so-called Roman Method of repression to quell the noncompliant. Since those long-ago days, numerous countries and empires (from autocracies to democracies) have used similar counterinsurgency (COIN) tactics. Indeed, the history of COIN is a depressing and unremitting tale of coercion and violence generally aimed not just at armed insurgents but at civilian populations as well.

CHRISTOPHER SERRA

The United States has not been immune from such conflicts—or their brutality. Counterinsurgent fights were waged at home against Native American tribes and in Central America, the Philippines and Vietnam. These small wars are in some manner the defining element of the American Way of War.

In recent years, however, the US military has not only rediscovered counterinsurgency but reinvented it, first in Iraq and now in Afghanistan. To listen to the American military or, better, to read the Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual, FM 3-24, is to hear a tale of COIN's bloody legacy of coercion and violence magically transformed.

According to this new telling, the key to winning COIN conflicts is in protecting civilians and providing a better future for them—that is, winning hearts and minds via civic action rather than military force. As written in FM 3-24, counterinsurgency fights are population-centric, not enemy-centric, and are defined by an extraordinarily broad array of capabilities, "political, economic, military, paramilitary, psychological, and civic actions."

On the most basic level, the key to COIN victory rests in protecting the population, providing good governance, extending the legitimacy of the host government and gaining the trust of the people. This notion of warfighting has become so internalized in US military thinking that even the past has been rewritten. New assessments of conflicts in Malaya and Vietnam, conducted by COIN advocates, confidently assert that civic action, not coercion—much less forced separation of insurgents from the population—turned the tide of those conflicts. In the case of Vietnam, COIN advocates argue that once the United States turned to counterinsurgency, the direction of the war shifted; and that had the United States had the resilience to see the fight through, the embrace of population-centric COIN would have led the way to success.

Much of this new take on COIN is a result of the US military's experience in Iraq, where, as the argument goes, a focus on protecting civilians and standing up the Iraqi government led to a decrease in civilian casualties. The supposed success of COIN tactics in Iraq, twinned with the 2007 surge of 30,000 US troops, led to the claim that these successes could be replicated in Afghanistan. Indeed, by the fall of 2009 Gen. Stanley McChrystal offered a strategic review of the situation in Afghanistan that concluded that a population-centric counterinsurgency—and only that strategy—could grasp victory from the jaws of defeat.

It is this approach that the United States began using in 2009 and the first half of 2010. Upon being named Afghanistan commander, McChrystal declared in Congressional testimony that it was more important to protect civilians than to kill insurgents. NATO officials even discussed the possibility of creating a new medal for "courageous restraint" for soldiers who take measures to avoid civilian casualties.

Indeed, COIN has become increasingly fetishized in US military thinking, training and guidance. Col. Gian Gentile, a frequent critic of population-centric counterinsurgency, recounts a recent experience listening to a three-star Army general telling West Point graduates that "what they needed to be good at when they went out into the field army—was establishing 'trusting relationships' with local populations." As Gentile acidly notes, "One would have liked soon-to-be-lieutenants told that they must be proficient in their basic branch skills: infantry and armor, basic fire and maneuver with their platoon as part of a maneuver company/team; artillery, fire support; logistics, logistical support; and so on."

The military's focus on COIN has been reflected in more than just rhetoric. When troops were sent into the town of Marja in Helmand province in February, the element of surprise was purposely given away. Military commanders made clear their intention to take the town and their hope that Taliban forces would flee, thus protecting civilians from being caught in the cross-fire.

Under the logic of COIN, such efforts to protect civilians are not only the right thing to do but are essential to military success, because safe and secure civilians will throw in their lot with the government and provide crucial intelligence for use in targeting insurgents. By securing the people, counterinsurgents can win the competition for the loyalty of the population.

This method of placing civilians front and center in military deliberations may on the surface seem quite progressive (indeed,

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COIN advocates have repeatedly made this argument). But it hasn't worked out that way. The United Nations recorded this past summer that the number of Afghan civilians killed in the first six months of the year jumped by a depressing 31 percent; in southern Afghanistan, where the war's heaviest fighting is taking place, civilian casualties (based on hospital admissions) have increased dramatically. While military officials are quick to argue that these increased deaths are largely the result of insurgent actions (and they are correct), this doesn't mean that local Afghans don't blame the United States and NATO. Recent opinion polling of Afghans suggests they do.

In fact, efforts to protect the Afghan population are failing. According to recent press accounts, insurgents in Kandahar province have carried out a successful campaign of intimidation and violence against local citizens. Writing recently in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Julius Cavendish reported that Taliban assassinations of officials there have become so pervasive that more than 600 government jobs remain unfilled. The situation in Marja—ten months after US and Afghan troops entered the town in what was billed as a major element of the military's counterinsurgency strategy—also remains challenging.

'COIN is a form of warfare.... Don't be fooled by the fact that Petraeus found some useful idiots to make it sound more palatable.'

Beyond the obvious difficulty of making protecting lives a priority in an active war zone, it has become evident over the past year that Afghanistan is a spectacularly poor choice for a population-centric COIN campaign. An effective counterinsurgency relies, in large measure, on a competent and legitimate host country government. Afghanistan has neither. Corruption is so bad that the UN Office on Drugs and Crime has estimated that "drugs and bribes are the two largest income generators in Afghanistan."

Afghanistan's security services are unable to hold areas cleared by US forces, and Afghan police are even less effective and lack the support of a functioning legal system. Making matters more difficult is the continued presence of undisturbed Afghan Taliban safe havens across the border in Pakistan. Finally, there are the Taliban, who have demonstrated a brutal willingness to use violence to cow the civilian populace into not cooperating with the United States, NATO or their own government.

A successful COIN campaign in Afghanistan is predicated on an extraordinary confluence of events: first, militarily reversing the Taliban's momentum without causing significant civilian casualties; second, standing up the Afghan government and security forces so they are able to hold and build on the gains made by Western troops; third, minimizing the impact of Taliban sanctuaries across the border, in part by convincing the Pakistani government to reduce its support for them. And all this must be done while operating under Obama's July 2011 deadline for commencing the withdrawal of US troops.

Achieving these goals demands an enormous political will and outlay of resources. Even by the measure of the military's counterinsurgency doctrine, at approximately 130,000 US and NATO troops and a US outlay of an estimated $100 billion a year, the current effort is underresourced. Achieving these goals would require not only tens (perhaps hundreds) of thousands of more troops; it would require a stated commitment to maintain the fight for years to come. After nine years of war, these are elements that seem increasingly in short supply.

To be sure, many of these arguments have been made for some time by COIN skeptics. But what is most revelatory is that the US military seems to be finally getting the message. In the media uproar over the *Rolling Stone* article that sank the career of General McChrystal, often overlooked was the recounting of his conversation with US soldiers in southern Afghanistan who complained that restrictive rules of engagement made it nearly impossible for them to do the job they were trained for—killing the enemy. With no sense of irony, McChrystal complained, "This is the philosophical part that works with think tanks...but it doesn't get the same reception from infantry companies."

McChrystal's replacement, Gen. David Petraeus, has adopted a far different approach to the war. While efforts at nation-building continue hesitantly, the biggest change has been in the use of direct military action against the insurgents. Air power, which for a while was minimized because of the risk of civilian casualties, has increased dramatically. According to the blog Danger Room, "The U.S. and its allies have unleashed a massive air campaign in Afghanistan, launching missiles and bombs from the sky at a rate rarely seen since the war's earliest days. In November alone, NATO aircraft launched 850 missions—three and a half times more than the same period in November 2009. Petraeus is also using more Special Operations forces in targeting Taliban commanders; and night raids, which have particularly inflamed the Karzai government, have recently tripled. In the three-month period ending October 21, Special Forces units conducted more than 1,500 operations, killing or capturing 339 insurgent leaders and more than 3,400 foot soldiers. NATO officials now hand out daily updates boasting about the number of insurgents killed or captured.

News reports leaked by military officials to reporters today do not speak of *shuras* convened, schools opened or corruption battled but instead boast of insurgents eliminated. The shift in tactical approach was perhaps an effort to show "progress" before the White House's planned December review of Afghan policy. But it should also be seen as something else: a more accurate reflection of how counterinsurgency conflicts—even modern ones—are waged. As a COIN theorist and military official said to me, "COIN is a form of warfare and thus involves violence. Don't be fooled by the fact that Petraeus found some useful idiots to make it sound more palatable and humanitarian."

The best evidence of this comes, ironically, from the US experience in Iraq. What led to the decrease in violence there was not an enhanced focus on protecting civilians; it was a confluence of factors: the extraordinary bloodletting in and around

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Baghdad that led to the forced separation of Sunnis and Shiites into ethnic enclaves; the flight of, by some estimates, 5 million Iraqis who have been internally and externally displaced; the paying off of, and support for, Sunni tribes who took on Al Qaeda in Iraq. And it wasn't just Iraqi-on-Iraqi violence—the number of civilians killed by US troops rose dramatically after the surge and the adoption of supposedly civilian-friendly measures. Four times as many Iraqis were killed by US airstrikes, which rose sevenfold after Petraeus took command in Iraq. While certainly there were US efforts to capture Iraqi hearts and minds, no one can reasonably argue that those measures were decisive.

According to Jeff Michaels, a COIN expert and research associate at King's College in London, "Killing lots of people was a key element of the Iraq surge, and so this [war in Afghanistan] is not too dissimilar. Indeed, too much emphasis has been placed on FM 3-24 rather than the real script they are operating from, which is to say that the Iraq case illustrated a considerable divergence from the theory."

What is happening in Afghanistan is an embrace of the aggressive approach to counterinsurgency once publicly dismissed by FM 3-24 advocates. This is not to suggest that US and NATO forces in Afghanistan have given up on trying to reach hearts and minds. But their embrace of techniques they once argued against is an implicit acknowledgment that the population-centric tactics of FM 3-24 have only marginal effectiveness in a nonpermissive environment like that of Afghanistan today. Like so many counterinsurgents before them, US generals are finding that the carrot is far less effective than the stick.

Their actual approach bears startling resemblance to the smaller-military-footprint counterterrorism strategy outlined by Vice President Biden during last year's strategic review debates. Put aside for now are dreams of state-building in the Hindu Kush or the belief that only by turning the people away from the insurgents can America secure its interests. Instead, military planners have shifted their focus to an end-game strategy of using lethal force to drive the Taliban to the negotiating table.

The shift in emphasis toward a more traditional conflict is compelling evidence of the disconnect between the theory of population-centric COIN and actual US capabilities—and an unstated recognition that FM 3-24 has so far not succeeded. This hasn't stopped COIN advocates from arguing that the shift in military emphasis is all part of the larger COIN effort; after all, they claim, direct military action is a crucial element of counterinsurgency. But these are self-serving and deceptive arguments, intended in part to mask the failure of the military to capture Afghan hearts and minds.

All of this matters for the future of US national security strategy. Much of the rationale for escalation in Afghanistan was based on the story of "success" in Iraq, and in particular on the supposed effectiveness of more population-sensitive counterinsurgency strategies executed there. But what should really be taken away from the US military's experience over the past ten years is not that the United States understands how to fight and win population-centric counterinsurgencies but that counterinsurgencies are as violent and inconclusive as any other conflicts, and that the United States should avoid such wars at all costs. ■

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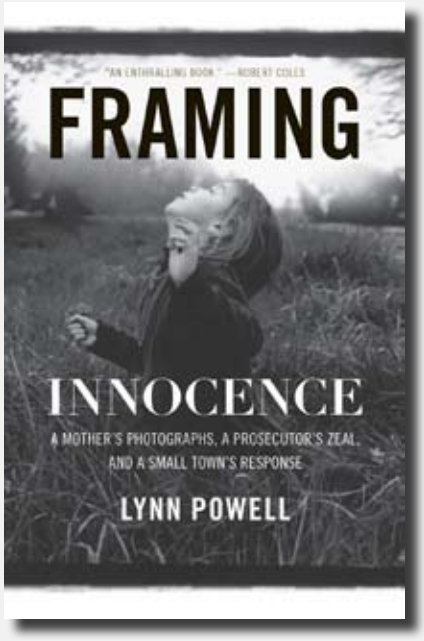
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Climate Clash in Cancún

China is warming up to the fight against climate change, but it's still cooling to US demands.

by LUCIA GREEN-WEISKEL

Cancún

Just after 3 AM on the last day of the UN climate change conference, exhausted negotiators from 193 countries signed an agreement that was modest and reflected elements of desperation (the one country refusing to sign, Bolivia, decried what it called "a hollow and false victory" that would fail "to prevent runaway climate change"). After the failure last year in Copenhagen, the UN-led talks were falling apart, with some beginning to suggests that the issue be handled outside the UN, either by bottom-up approaches or in more elite groups like the G-20. The Cancún Agreements are significantly less ambitious than what many observers had hoped for, but at least they avoided collapse. The failure in Copenhagen and Cancún to agree on binding emissions-reduction targets marks a significant scaling back from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the first and only international agreement to set legally binding targets.

CHRISTOPHER SERRA

In lieu of binding targets, the Cancún Agreements address technical issues like transfers of green technology to developing countries and a reiteration of the domestic reduction plans initiated in previous talks. The documents postpone, until next year's conference in Durban, South Africa, the contentious issue of whether to extend Kyoto, which expires in 2012. Instead they call for establishing a $100 billion fund to help developing countries adapt to climate change. But that fund will be managed by the World Bank, which has a dismal record on environmental protection. And it is still not clear where the money will come from.

"It is not what is ultimately required, but it is the essential foundation on which to build greater, collective ambition," said Christiana Figueres, executive secretary of the UN process, formally known as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Between pleas for progress, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon had to resort to a tired cliché to describe the mood: "We cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good." By producing an agreement, the Cancún delegates partially restored the credibility lost at Copenhagen.

A key question about Cancún was whether the world's biggest emitters, the United States and China, would come any closer to a common understanding on who is responsible for the climate problem and what to do about it. The two countries together account for 30 percent of the world's economic output and 40 percent of greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels. The US and Chinese negotiators at Cancún were crafty and subtle. Both teams used cautious language that on the surface appeared to present similar positions. Both wanted a deal and both wanted to be seen as playing a constructive role—but each saw the other as an obstruction to progress.

When Dr. Yang Fuqiang, director of Global Climate Solutions for WWF International, arrived in Cancún, his hopes were dim that the United States and China would reach a meaningful agreement on reductions. With more than thirty years of experience working on energy and environmental issues in China, Yang has attended the three most recent of the UN's sixteen rounds of climate negotiations. China, he said, would only accept an agreement that allowed exemptions for developing countries—the concept known as "common but differentiated responsibilities," which is the bedrock of the Kyoto Protocol. In this claim, China is aligned with Article 3.1 of the UNFCCC charter, which states, "The developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof."

Throughout the meetings, the US deputy special envoy for climate change, Jonathan Pershing, expressed plans to scrap Kyoto—not surprising, since the United States is the only developed country that has not signed it. Washington wanted to draft a new agreement that has "symmetry"—one that is legally binding for developed *and* developing countries. As Pershing explained in a briefing to NGOs, the Obama administration can't sell a package in Congress that doesn't include specific requirements for developing countries like China.

By the end of the conference, it was clear that both delegations were oriented toward domestic regulators more than anything else. The chief negotiators, Xie Zhenhua and Todd Stern, read the same document but reported on it in completely different ways. Xie told China's Xinhua news agency that the Cancún Agreements uphold the Kyoto Protocol and reaffirm the principle of differentiated responsibilities. Stern told a press conference that the Cancún Agreements build on the 2009 Copenhagen Accord (widely viewed as the document that undoes Kyoto) and reflect progress toward firmer commitments from all nations, developed and developing.

From the beginning, the UNFCCC process has been marred by a sharp divide between developed and developing countries. Key developed countries hold the view that the developing world, where energy consumption is accelerating, should be bound by firm targets. The position of the developing countries, which China firmly promotes, distinguishes between luxury emissions and sustenance emissions, arguing that the latter are required for economic development and to alleviate pressing problems such as poverty and inadequate infrastructure.

Lucia Green-Weiskel is a project manager of the climate change program at the Beijing-based Innovation Center for Energy and Transportation.

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In Copenhagen Chinese negotiators were eager to point out that although China is the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases on an annual basis, its per capita emissions remain much lower than those of America (and America is still the world's largest climate polluter on a cumulative, or historic, basis). In addition, they point out, almost a quarter of China's emissions come from the manufacture of products sold in the West, a fact that leads many in China to argue for a consumption-based rather than a production-based approach to emissions quantification. Given this different view of the accounting process, China prefers to use its own domestic mechanisms to set and meet targets outside the UN system.

US-China tension erupted during the debate over measuring and verifying emissions. In UN parlance this is called MRV, or measuring, reporting and verification of greenhouse gas emissions. MRV, where the treaty details are actually spelled out, is what gives the agreement meaning and power and thus is also the area that can cause the greatest turbulence. It is to climate change what the 1040 is to taxes, an agreed methodology that makes clear what is and what isn't included in a carbon footprint, at the individual, corporate or national level. Too technical for nonexperts, MRV helps standardize quantification and ensures that a ton of CO_2 in France is equal to a ton of CO_2 in China or the United States.

Beijing views calls for inspections and transparency as an infringement of its sovereignty and an attempt to destabilize its government.

The United States and China have agreed on how to do the M (using criteria established by the International Organization for Standardization) and the R (with domestic mechanisms and answering to local or central governments). But there is serious dispute over verification, and who has the authority to determine what constitutes an "avoided" ton of carbon—that is, carbon that would have been released into the atmosphere but was not because of national policies that promoted cleaner technology. The United States insists that emissions reductions not transparent and verified by international inspectors are not valid. For China, this is an example of how the United States has politicized the climate talks. Beijing views calls for inspections and "more transparency" as an infringement of its sovereignty and alleges ulterior motives aimed at destabilizing its government. From China's perspective, the US demands on verification are less about climate change than about the American establishment's desire for China to adopt Western-style democracy and transparency.

The tension was evident at an intercessional meeting in Tianjin in October, when Xie's deputy, Su Wei, met with his US counterparts. In Copenhagen, Vice Foreign Minister He Yafei had said Stern "lacked common sense." In Tianjin, the vitriol continued when Su said Stern (in absentia) was like a "pig preening itself in the mirror," a reference from an ancient Chinese legend that implies hypocrisy and gluttony. (I was later told by a Chinese friend that this episode was misunderstood in the US media and that two different but similar idioms were confused.)

Perhaps it was the paradisiacal quality of the turquoise beaches and the ubiquitous margaritas, but there was clearly a warming of relations at Cancún. Yang Ailun of Greenpeace noted that the Chinese delegation chose to focus on what it could offer rather than what it would oppose. This new posture marks a clear departure from its negotiating style at Copenhagen and Tianjin. But the new tactics do not reflect a new position. China's stance in Cancún—that its voluntary reductions could be part of a global agreement if the United States adopts a legally binding commitment—is a new arrangement of its previous position. The fact that the United States, given its domestic political climate, will probably not adopt a legally binding agreement renders the Chinese offer moot. It shows, however, that China is becoming a more sophisticated negotiator and more adept at public relations.

Su Wei, second in command of the Chinese delegation after Xie, opened the conference by declaring that China would play a "constructive role" in the talks. In the first week he announced that the differences between the United States and China were not significant. Then, to the shock of many, he said casually, "We have no problem with MRV." This statement struck many as a reversal of China's Copenhagen position, which had been vigorously against the MRV process. But, as Yang explained to me, when the United States and China speak about the MRV process, they have different ideas about what it means—and it is precisely these differences that prevent agreement on the fundamental issues of climate change.

To find out more about the MRV process, I talked with Lo Sze Ping, who has worked on China's climate policies with Greenpeace and on greenhouse gas accounting with the Beijing-based Society of Entrepreneurs and Ecology. Lo attended the Cancún conference as a member of Green China: Race to the Future, a consortium of Chinese and international NGOs, including Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council, which are raising awareness about the importance of climate change. In Cancún, they published a position paper calling on the Chinese and other governments to take stronger action to fight climate change. "China is playing hard on the MRV issues technically not because they are against it but because this is the issue where the United States is poking China," Lo explained. "From China's point of view, there are two issues.

The first is the issue of not making MRV references to finance and technology. The US demands aren't backed with money. It is entirely unclear where the financial resources will come from to support the reductions that the developed world is asking of developing countries. The developed countries are pressuring developing countries to become more transparent, but the issue of funding from developed countries is far from transparent." Indeed, developed countries have not been clear about where the $30 billion in fast-track funds will come from or how they will be allocated. Although promised in Copenhagen for the period

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of 2010–12, less than half of the money has materialized.

"The second issue," Lo continued, "is that developing countries are not happy with the insufficient ambitions from developed countries regarding their own reduction plans for the medium term [up to 2020]. What is on the table from developed countries does not add up to what is required by science." This point leads China to believe that the United States is not willing to accept its share of climate responsibility. "Developed countries didn't show sincerity in their response, and now they are asking the developing countries, like China, to do more than what is required by the Kyoto Protocol," said Lo.

And this is where MRV comes in. The United States understands that process as a rigorous mechanism for reductions that should be applied in the same way to all countries, developed and developing. In the US view, MRV should have universal application, in which international inspectors with official access to the domestic activities of a country can verify reports of reduced emissions. Chinese negotiators view the US interpretation of MRV as a way of reversing the "common but differentiated responsibilities" clause in the Kyoto Protocol. "China believes we should not be renegotiating the mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol; instead, we should stick to the Kyoto Protocol and negotiate just the second commitment period targets for each country," Lo explained. "MRV could be used as the Trojan horse to dismantle the Kyoto Protocol." For China, the MRV process functions as a domestic tool to quantify and verify emissions and reductions—an accounting instrument that China has already adopted. To Beijing, MRV and "differentiated responsibilities" are not mutually exclusive.

After sixteen climate change meetings, beginning with the first conference in Berlin in 1995, the United States and China are still unable to get beyond the dilemma of how to quantify emissions and determine who is responsible for reducing them. To progress, the United States would have to show China it has adopted a national plan for emissions reductions, such as cap and trade. As long as America forgoes domestic climate legislation, China is likely to doubt the sincerity of US action. Now, with recent GOP victories in Congress—86 percent of the incoming Republicans oppose government action on climate change—and noise from Tea Partiers (only 8 percent of whom believe global warming is caused by human activity), the United States appears to be retreating from climate legislation.

While US green ambitions are shrinking, China is reorienting its economy toward sustainability and renewable energy in a way that is nothing short of revolutionary. It has invested billions in renewable energy, energy efficiency, public transportation (the Chinese bullet train made headlines by reaching a record 300 mph during the Cancún talks) and developing standards for products, buildings, vehicles and fuels. In July Xie announced that a cap-and-trade system would be included in China's twelfth five-year plan (2011–15). In September China's most powerful agency, the National Development and Reform Commission, announced that China was setting up low-carbon pilot sites in five provinces and eight cities. One focus is to implement methods to measure, report and verify emissions. These events are an indication that China's lead over the United States in green technology will likely increase in the coming years.

Green technology is still a boutique industry in the United States, while China is producing it on a massive scale. Through aggressive government investment and central planning, Beijing has become a leader in solar panel technology, wind turbines and electric vehicle manufacturing. In fact, it is emerging as the only country in the world capable of driving down the price of green technology so that it can become affordable in poor countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

However, China's government-led policies have met with hostility in the United States. Earlier this year the United Steelworkers filed a 5,800-page complaint with US trade representatives, stating that China's subsidies of green technology were illegal and unfair. From the Chinese perspective, this is a no-win paradigm: if China doesn't invest in a cleaner economy, US lawmakers threaten to slap a high-carbon tariff on Chinese imports. But if China takes the environmental issue seriously and invests in renewable energy, US lawmakers threaten to punish China for "unfair" trade practices. Without prospects for a US-led agreement for emissions reductions at the UN, China has become a scapegoat in the US media and among US politicians. China-bashing is at an all-time high. In the recent midterm elections, an astonishing twenty-nine candidates used anti-China messages in campaign ads.

While US green ambitions are shrinking, China is reorienting its economy toward sustainability and renewable energy in revolutionary ways.

Dr. Dale Jiajun Wen is a Chinese citizen who watched the US-China negotiations from San Francisco, where she is China Scholar at the International Forum on Globalization. "The US failed to pass crucial climate legislation. Meanwhile, it has been seeking to divert attention away from its own failures by pointing fingers at China," she says. "The Chinese people are asking the US to stop using China as an excuse for its own inaction.

"China is very serious about its targets," she continues. "In recent months, in the final push to achieve its domestic energy efficiency target for the eleventh five-year plan, not only were some factories shut down but also some residential areas experienced blackouts. Have any Annex 1 [developed] countries had blackouts in order to comply with Kyoto targets? Yet in most discussions about transparency in Western media, China is presumed guilty. In Bali [the thirteenth climate change conference, in 2007], the United States was told, 'If you are not willing to lead, then get out of the way.' To give it fair credit, the Bush government did get out of the way and allowed the world to move forward with the Bali Action Plan. Now it is again time to ask the United States to get out of the way if it cannot lead." ■

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Sudan Prepares to Break Apart

Finally, after decades of catastrophic civil war, Africa may give birth to a new nation.

by TRISTAN McCONNELL

Juba and Malakal

"The suffering of southerners was created in colonial times," says Peter Lam, a retired teacher in his 70s from Malakal, a trading town in Sudan where north meets south on the banks of the Nile River. As Sudan's second independence approaches, we are discussing the first, and what has gone wrong.

Lam tells me that Britain's colonial neglect of the south meant that when it came to negotiations for independence, southern "native chiefs" were conned by the sophisticated northern "teachers and philosophers" into accepting a deal that united the country under a single government in Khartoum. "When independence came we felt deceived by unity and we revolted," recalls Lam.

In fact, Sudan's civil war began in 1955, the year before the country gained independence. The people of southern Sudan, an oil-rich but terribly poor region where most of the 9 million or so inhabitants have either Christian or animist beliefs, say they never got their independence. That is why they fought the dominance of the Arab Muslims of northern Sudan for the better part of fifty years. At last, they believe, independence is coming. "Now is our real independence," Lam says with a broad smile. "The south has already gone."

On January 9 southern Sudanese are scheduled to vote in a referendum on secession that is expected to split Africa's biggest country and give birth to the world's newest nation. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has called a vote in favor of separation "inevitable." The referendum is the culmination of the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), brokered by the United States and others, which ended the last twenty-two-year round of north-south fighting. By the time it was over, 2 million had died, mostly from starvation and disease rather than direct violence. Perhaps 4 million more had been forced to flee their homes, leaving the region in tatters. In mid-November southerners began registering to vote, marking the final step toward the referendum, but there are widespread fears that the vote may trigger a return to catastrophic violence.

For now, there is a singleness of purpose reflected in a growing sense of separate national identities, as southerners return from the north—some out of fear for their safety, some out of excitement at the prospect of independence—and northerners prepare to leave the south. Even before the referendum, you can see Sudan tearing itself in two.

Malakal is a two-hour flight north of Juba, the southern capital-in-waiting. Seen through the airplane's window, the Nile and its banks are a brush stroke of vivid green painted on an endless tinder-dry brown canvas. The White Nile dissipates into a vast wetlands known as the Sudd, which from the air looks like an endless pasture, until the plane banks and the grass resolves itself into swamp as the sun reflects off the water.

The airstrip and the town of Malakal are bookended by rival barracks: the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) on one side and the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) on the other. As with the country itself, an unclear line separates the north and south of Malakal. When fighting has erupted in the years since the CPA, it has often been here. In 2006 and 2009 hundreds were killed as the armies took each other on, firing mortars over Malakal's crumbling, tin-roofed buildings and sending tanks and troops onto its wide, rutted streets. At the center of town a stone mosque built by Egypt in the 1940s dominates the surrounding market, where Arab traders keep the local economy alive selling goods to southern businesses and buyers. As the day passes, the mosque's minaret casts a shadow like that of a sundial across the dust-colored bungalows and shanties.

Apart from oil extraction, fast-growing telecommunications and an impressive new brewery in Juba, southern Sudan remains largely un-industrialized. Investors from as far afield as China, India, America and Europe are looking to the oil and agriculture sectors, but for now southern Sudan produces almost nothing and imports almost everything. Businessmen from neighboring Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea have rushed in since the end of the war, competing with northern Arab traders who have long cornered the southern market.

But as the referendum approaches, things are changing in Malakal. Every day barges coming upriver from the north arrive at the port carrying southerners and their belongings. They go to live with relatives, quickly dissipating into the population. No one is counting, but there are thought to be thousands returning every month. Meanwhile, northern traders tell me they are planning to shut up shop and go back to the north to sit out what they fear might be a dangerous referendum period.

While the north-south fault line is deep and antagonisms are intense, there are fears that the south itself may balkanize among competing ethnic groups. Opportunistic politicians in both north and south have grown adept at fanning tensions for their own gain. Tribal fighting has occurred with depressing regularity since the end of the war, sometimes when farmers and cattle-herders clash over land, sometimes when Khartoum deploys its oft-used tactic of funding and arming anti-SPLA militias in the south. Thousands die every year in these conflicts; last year 2,500 were killed. Even during the north-south civil war, fighting between, say, Dinka and Nuer tribes in the south resulted in massacres every bit as brutal as those perpetrated by the northern Arabs on southerners.

The southern government, led by the former rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) under President

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Salva Kiir, has been making some desperate deals to ensure that the vote goes ahead. Rebellious politicians and powerful southern warlords have been bought off with amnesties, government and military positions, nice houses and a warning not to be remembered as the one who derailed southern freedom. "The south-south thing is here to stay," one foreign military officer told me. "All these conciliatory moves are to ensure the referendum, but afterwards they will re-emerge. The problems will resurface."

"People should separate first, then we will confront what is inside," says Samuel Aban Deng, a senior courtier to the tribal king of the Shilluk, an ethnic group that dominates in Malakal but feels marginalized elsewhere in the south. Dressed in a traditional *lawo* sheet tied over his shoulder, Deng complains that the Dinka tribe controls the SPLM and has hijacked independence. He says the other southern tribes will not put up with it much longer. "The bigger threat to an independent south Sudan is not from outside, it is from within," he tells me ominously.

The seemingly irreconcilable religious, ethnic and cultural differences that cut through Sudan are exacerbated by the legacy of weapons and brutality from decades of war. And then there is the oil. Sudan's reserves are estimated to be around 6 billion barrels, its production close to half a million barrels a day. Perhaps four-fifths of that oil lies in the south, but all the pipelines head north toward the country's only refineries, forcing the two to work together, at least so far. Under the CPA the oil revenues are shared equally between north and south, but what will happen after the referendum is as unclear as the delineation of the disputed border.

The National Congress Party government in Khartoum is a pariah regime. President Omar al-Bashir, who took power after a 1989 coup, is accused by the International Criminal Court in The Hague of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in the western region of Darfur. The United States listed Sudan as a state sponsor of terror after Osama bin Laden briefly made Khartoum his home in the 1990s, and sanctions followed.

But Sudan's oil wealth allowed Bashir to shrug off sanctions, launch a war in Darfur and turn Khartoum into a boomtown. It consolidates his power and buys off his enemies. He is therefore as loath to lose the oil as southerners are to continue sharing it. "These are my resources, they are in my house. How long should I continue to share them?" asks James Marboto Katas, a civil servant in Juba. "This will bring war," he tells me.

The SPLM is even more reliant on the oil than Khartoum: revenues from oil exports account for 98 percent of the south's annual budget. It has earned more than $8 billion from oil since the signing of the CPA, but outside chaotically bustling Juba there is little to show for this bounty. International NGOs have summarized the conditions under which most southern Sudanese scrape a living in an inventory of misery dubbed the "scary statistics": one in seven women will die during pregnancy, the same proportion of newborns will die before their fifth birthday, 90 percent live on less than $1 a day. Of the 9 million people living in the south, 85 percent are illiterate.

"People keep wondering, where have all the oil revenues gone? The problem is a lot of the money has not been spent in the right way," says Leben Nelson Moro, a professor at Juba University's Center for Peace and Development Studies, with soft-spoken understatement. "Corruption is a huge problem, so a lot went into individuals' pockets. There was a feeling among the liberators that they missed out during all the fighting, so they deserved to catch up, to have a house, to send their children to school, to have money," he explains as we sit in the shade outside his campus office.

Other money was spent on the military: keeping soldiers on the payroll and buying the new tanks, anti-aircraft guns, rockets, helicopters and small arms the south is stockpiling in wary anticipation of a fresh fight with Khartoum. Moro says that although NGOs and diplomats might frown on these purchases in light of the desperate need for roads, schools and clinics, southerners understand the priorities. "People simply know that there is a real possibility of war. We need to get the south first, then we can get development, governance, proper elections," he tells me. "If we build now and then we go back to war, what did we build for?"

AP PHOTO/MAGGIE FLICK

Southern Sudanese citizens marching in Juba to support the independence referendum, December 9

The United States is weighing in heavily to keep the peace. Washington has dispatched an army of diplomats and helped fund the referendum and UN peacekeepers in hopes of keeping a lid on tensions. There are 30,000 blue helmets in Sudan already—10,000 of whom are in the south, the rest in Darfur—but even so, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned the Security Council in November, "the presence of UN troops will not be enough to prevent a return to war should widespread hostilities erupt."

The UN is mulling sending in more soldiers, has devoted special sessions on Sudan at New York headquarters and has appointed special representatives to keep the vote on track. Aid and advocacy groups have issued dire warnings. Veteran Africa specialist John Prendergast—a former Clinton administration official and co-founder of the Enough Project, a human rights NGO—has been conducting a high-profile campaign, often accompanied by actor George Clooney, to prevent catastrophic violence. Clooney and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof have both warned of the danger of genocide.

Alarmist predictions aside, the signs are not good. As the referendum draws closer, Khartoum has traded fiery rhetoric

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with Juba on issues as diverse as citizenship and nationality, sharing of oil and water, security arrangements, international debt, currency, border demarcation and the status of the disputed territory of Abyei.

Hard-to-verify reports claim that north and south are deploying troops to the 1,300-mile border, where regular skirmishes erupt between soldiers who disagree on where exactly the line in the sand lies. Referendum preparations are months behind schedule, largely because of Khartoum's stalling, and a parallel plebiscite that is supposed to be held in Abyei seems unlikely to take place in January.

Washington is worried. Southern Sudan is one place in the world where America's foreign policy record this century is unquestionably good. Elsewhere, the Bush years will be remembered for bringing war, but here the United States was part of a troika, including Britain and Norway, that brokered the 2005 peace deal. January's referendum is the culmination of the CPA, and if it passes off peacefully, Washington can lay claim to having helped end a long and bloody civil war; if not, it will have presided over its rekindling. "There was a huge international effort to end Africa's longest civil war. We now need that international pressure to keep the referendum on track," says David Gressly, regional coordinator for southern Sudan at the UN Mission in Sudan, during an interview on the UN base in Juba.

The referendum is about the south, but diplomatic efforts are aimed more at the north, which is seen as the potential spoiler. In November Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair John Kerry visited Khartoum with a message from President Obama: he offered to remove Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terror and begin normalizing relations if Khartoum allows the referendum to go ahead and peacefully accepts the outcome. Washington hopes this and other incentives will encourage Bashir to accept partition.

"The will of the people must be respected by all parties in Sudan and around the world, because we have already seen the alternative," Hillary Clinton told the UN Security Council in November. "The alternative, the unacceptable alternative, is Sudan's past: more than four decades of recurring conflict, 2 million people dead, millions more displaced, simmering tensions that stall development and perpetuate poverty, then erupt again to darken the lives of another generation of Sudanese children."

In Juba there seems little doubt what the result of the referendum will be. Defying the power cuts that blight the emerging capital, an electronic signboard counts down the vote, its dot-matrix display flashing the ever-diminishing time minute by minute. At a popular hotel made of dozens of bolted-together metal containers, SPLM official Suzanne Jambo tells me that delaying or denying southern Sudanese their vote would bring chaos. "Every southern Sudanese, wherever we are, we want our freedom, freedom from the north, which fought us and committed injustices over all these years," she said. "If you want to force me into unity I will go to war." ■

Letters

(continued from page 2)

tory must feel let down by Obama the president. Perhaps we should have known better—a bright, caring, very articulate black president would be anathema to America's white reactionary establishment. The Tea Party is the well-financed bully mob of this establishment.

Future historians will have to grapple with Barack Obama, the black, bright and sensitive youngster with a strange foreign name, who must have learned early to be nice if you don't want to get beaten up. I know: growing up in Weimar Germany as "Jesaja, that Polish Jew-boy," you avoided even eye contact with "them." But it never works, no matter how accommodating you are.

Si Lewen

Nashville

I've always maintained that the key to understanding Obama is to study Abraham Lincoln. Both men were rather detached, cerebral and able to inspire crowds with lofty language. Both men were brilliant and cautious by nature. Both men sought areas of consensus with their adversaries even as their adversaries rebuffed them. Both men had genuinely progressive core principles and sensibilities; yet because they sought consensus first, both men's actual policy positions were more moderate, and frustrating to progressives. Both men saw this approach as the key to getting any progress out of this profoundly conservative country with a government of checks and balances. Both men took fierce criticism from the right—much of it race-based—and from the left. And somehow, both men managed to move the country in a more progressive direction in spite of itself.

What's different is us. Progressives. In Lincoln's day, facing bigger obstacles than we face today, abolitionists had a cause that was larger than Lincoln, and they never stopped fighting for it. Although immediate abolition was out of the question, they sought out every smaller fight they could find. Can we exclude slavery from the new territories taken from Mexico? If Congress can't abolish slavery in the states, can we at least disentangle the federal government from slavery by abolishing it in military posts and the District of Columbia? If a true abolitionist is unelectable, can we at least elect Lincoln, who is a moderate on abolition but is with us at heart?

The right wing understands this. Its leaders announced before Obama even took office that they would work to make him fail, and they've been doing that nonstop ever since. And what of the left? A lot of the turnout that elected Obama stayed home in November and allowed Republicans and Tea Partiers to win in state and Congressional races. That side never stops fighting.

Obama told us this. The causes we believe in are bigger than him, and we would have to keep fighting even after Inauguration Day—and every single day. The abolitionists knew this. We do not. That is the difference. That's where progressive change is won and lost.

Kim White

No Fan of the Tan Man

Holmes, N.Y.

More on Boehner as muse ["Letters," Nov. 29]:

Pelosi and Reid,
I must accede,
Just couldn't go the distance.
And so the switch
to McConnell, Mitch,
and the Boehner of my existence.

Jeremy Wolff

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Books & the Arts.

An Inventory of Missing

by BEN EHRENREICH

Forty years ago, in a world that has long since disappeared, a writer who was no longer exactly young—he was 35 and, by the standards of the day, five years past untrustworthy—published a startling little book called *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March*. It was fiction of the sort that even now makes the novel as a form feel like something delightfully and bewilderingly new, which is, if you put any stock in the meaning of words, what a novel is supposed to be. Frederic Tuten's book was a peculiar, fragmentary thing: all jump-cut and pastiche and deadpan mimicry. It was about Mao, but via the rabbit hole of pop assemblage. Tuten spliced a straight history of the Long March with paragraphs and whole pages culled from Jack London, James Fenimore Cooper, Melville, Hawthorne, Ruskin and Wilde, and he folded in parodies of Malamud, Faulkner and Hemingway ("You knew that if you said it all truly there would be enough there for a long time. Enough of the olives and Baked Alaska when the air conditioner blew at you hard in the fine little room behind the zinc of the bar at Sardi's"). Mao discourses on art and poetry and "sex-love." He talks about Godard and Dalí and Wallace Stevens. Greta Garbo seduces him from atop a flower-strewn tank: "Mao, I have been bad in Moscow and wicked in Paris…but I have never met a MAN whom I could love."

Today, with all the indolent advantages of hindsight, we might file away Tuten's first novel on that high shelf of heady oddities labeled "the postmodern," alongside the fiction of Robert Coover, Donald Barthelme and Gilbert Sorrentino, and perhaps a soundtrack of early Brian Eno. But in 1971 *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March* was no curio. Roy Lichtenstein designed the cover image: a smiling, stippled Chairman in a cartoon burst of color. (Warhol wouldn't get to Mao for two more years.) Susan Sontag blurbed the book as "violently hilarious." Dame Iris Murdoch recognized Tuten as "serious." John Updike reviewed the book in *The New Yorker*. "We are confronted," he wrote approvingly, "with something truly *other* than the reasonable liberalism and sentimental romanticism that have shaped our radically imperfect world." That world would quickly fade into another, and then another, each more imperfect than the last. As for the "truly other," it would soon be exiled—if not from the culture entirely, at least from the local literary mainstream, a creek that would grow narrower as the decades passed, and less welcoming of the novel.

Portrait (1977), by Roy Lichtenstein

© ESTATE OF ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Self Portraits
Fictions.
by Frederic Tuten.
Norton. 232 pp. $23.95.

Tuten would not publish another book for seventeen years. *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March* fell out of print and became a strange, secret treasure, one whispered of by writers in the know. For years, it was easier to find in French than in English—Raymond

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Queneau was an admirer, and *Les Aventures de Mao pendant la longue marche* is still in the Gallimard catalog. But it grew alien with age. *Mao* had been an intensely optimistic work, written, in Tuten's words, when China's revolution was "still fresh and seemingly uncorrupted." Formally, it was not so much a rebellion against the inherited strictures of literary realism but a celebration in their absence, a gentle roast turned all-night dance party. By the time Tuten's next novel, *Tallien: A Brief Romance*, was published in 1988, the insurrectionary playfulness epitomized by *Mao* had long since gone stiff. In the first world, at least—if we can allow ourselves the nostalgia of that term—postrevolutionary ecstasy had been poisoned by kitsch, commerce and too much bad faith. *Mao* had become an artifact.

Self Portraits is vital, wistful and filled with sweet ache, loneliness and longing.

Tuten would write of his first book, "I was taken by the idea of an impersonal fiction, one whose personality was the novel's and not apparently that of its author, an ironic work impervious to irony, its tone a matte gun-metal gray with just a flash of color here and there to warm the reader." *Tallien* is warmer and more personal, if less brash and less bold: a sad, sober book, a stubborn ode to disillusion. It takes the form of a story told by a son to his late father, who, like Tuten's own, had been a Southern gentleman turned radical labor organizer and who, like Tuten's father, had left his wife and only son in the Bronx when the boy was still a child. When the novel opens, the father, Rex—a name that will reappear in Tuten's work—has just died alone in Jersey City. The narrator wishes he could have told him about the life of the French revolutionary Jean Lambert Tallien. He can't—so he tells us.

It is not a happy tale. One of the few Jacobin leaders to live through the Terror he helped spawn, Tallien spared the life of a count's daughter, then fell in love with her. She would ultimately betray him, as he would betray his comrades and his principles alike before dying alone—"the fireplace cold, embers in the grate like the ashes of dead stars"—in a France once again ruled by a Bourbon king. Tallien's is the story of utopia's defeat, of the New Day's devolution into a "post-revolutionary state parceled out among flunkies and underlings and bureauristocrats with *ci-devant* disco shades." The novel is at once a son's melancholic revenge on his absent lefty father—marching the Kronstadt corpses past the silent old Bolshevik believer—and his acknowledgment of defeat before the old man's untouchable integrity. The dead win every time.

If Tuten's next and best-known novel, *Tintin in the New World*, feels in its frolicking elegiac irony closer to the world of *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March* than to *Tallien*'s Reagan-era blues, it's because much of the book actually predates its predecessor. An early draft opened with an invented letter from Mao to André Malraux. But it took Tuten twenty years to finish the book, and Mao and Malraux had disappeared from its pages by the time it was published in 1993. Not one to forget a kindness, in his dedication to his friend Hergé, creator of the sexless and eternally youthful cartoon adventurer, Tuten included a line thanking the Guggenheim Foundation for a grant awarded in 1973.

Like most of Tuten's novels, *Tintin in the New World* half-follows Flann O'Brien's half-joking dictum that the "entire corpus of existing literature should be regarded as a limbo from which discerning authors could draw their characters as required." Tintin, restless after a long year at Marlinspike with his faithful dog Snowy and old drunk Captain Haddock, sets off for Machu Picchu and there meets the assembled cast of Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*, only slightly modified: the Jesuit fascist sympathizer Naptha (Naphta in Mann's original), Settembrini the humanist, the beautiful Madame Chauchat ("whose voice purred of autumn leaves rasping across a grate") and her lover, the sensualist Peeperkorn. There are also characters of Tuten's invention: a mysterious "Chinaman," the outlaw Pimento and Lieutenant dos Amantes, who tells of an Incan legend of a golden-haired god who will appear one day from the west to unite the oppressed indigenous peoples of the Americas: "Some say this new god is a man; some, a woman; some androgynous."

You may have guessed the end already, but before Tintin becomes a revolutionary jaguar messiah, he must grow into a man. The utopian spark survives, but wizened. Tintin learns of moral failure; of ambiguity, age, sadness, loss. He is introduced by Madame Chauchat to Mao's old sex-love, now rendered hotly hyphenless: "to sexlove and sexkiss and sexsigh and sexbreath to sex longings and sex spendings, and more." Tuten lets the pair grow old at Marlinspike, then—"Thundering figs!"—rescues them from that dull dream of domesticity, turning back time and tossing Tintin back into the new world to adventure again.

Tintin is more gentle than *The Adventures of Mao on the Long March* or *Tallien* and easily Tuten's funniest novel. In its reception, it must have felt for a moment like *Mao* redux. Roy Lichtenstein again painted the cover image (Tintin in an easy chair, a Matisse on the wall behind him and a dagger flying past). Susan Sontag wrote another blurb. Edmund White gushed in the *New York Times*. Another generation of novelists would discover the lush, off-kilter whimsy of Tuten's prose—an encomium Paul La Farge wrote for *The Believer* would be added as an introduction to later editions—but *Tintin in the New World* seemed out of place. It was brilliant but had arrived at once too early and too late, its gravity too flip for the age of Clinton and Cobain, its irony too warmblooded for the *Seinfeld* crowd.

Tuten would publish two more novels over the next nine years. In 1997 there was *Van Gogh's Bad Café*, in which the artist's morphine addict lover walks through a wall in Auvers-sur-Oise and emerges in a not-yet gentrified East Village; and in 2002 *The Green Hour*, about a doomed, lifelong romance between an art historian and a peripatetic idealist named Rex. Both are soft, painterly books about love, art and death, written from atop "a mountain-high pyramid of the century's murdered corpses," and bearing all the high humanist mournfulness that such a perch implies. Both are more concerned with the order imposed within the four edges of a canvas—or, by extension, a novel—than with the various Rexes' expired dreams of social harmony. Painters are everywhere on and in these books. Tuten writes about Goya, Gauguin and especially about the otherworldly formal order of Poussin. The cover of *Tallien* was a David Salle painting. *Van Gogh's Bad Café* was illustrated by Tuten's friend Eric Fischl.

On the jacket of *Self Portraits: Fictions*, Tuten's new collection of short stories, there's a Lichtenstein again. It's *Portrait*, an empty suit with a slab of holey yellow Swiss floating where the head should be. The painting is a nod to the Surrealists, which makes it a compound nod from Tuten: to his late friend Lichtenstein; to "such artists like Max Earnest and Salvador Dolly," as he has one character put it; to his own *Mao* and *Tintin*; and to the empty-suitedness of us all, our heads filled with

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holes and moldy cream, our lives imagined, dreamlike, almost gone.

While crafting *Mao*, Tuten later wrote, he was eager to avoid the favored material of first novelists: "the common tissue of fictionalized autobiography." The stories of *Self Portraits*, though, feature a very Tuten-like narrator, and several travel back to the penurious Bronx of Tuten's childhood. (His mother and grandmother loom larger here than old Rex the wanderer, with whom he has perhaps made peace.) But the prose is too exquisite for there to be anything common about the tissue from which he crafted *Self Portraits*. Tuten writes with a calm, deft simplicity that leaves room for startling metaphor ("beneath a toothless sky," or "with a smile to kill a ripe eel") and for passages of fluid, melancholy beauty. The stories are concerned less with fictionalizing the past than with the fiction of the past, with the crucial play of fantasy through which we fashion ourselves, and with the limit of all such play: "What is so pressing," Tuten asks, "that makes Death so curt, so interruptive of the narrative?"

From story to story, settings and characters appear and reappear. The tables of a near-empty restaurant in a hotel across from Central Park. A missing waiter. An apartment facing Tompkins Square Park. A woman named Marie. A third man, sinister, shape-shifting, but always oddly familiar—the narrator's unshakable rival. A pirate ship just out the window on Avenue B. A stylish young couple in love's early blushes, "foolish and oblivious to the endings of anything, let alone to the end of love." Outside it is always snowing, except when it is raining or the world is on fire. Everything is beautiful and just out of reach, and everything will soon vanish.

Self Portraits is an old man's backward glance on life, but it is not cynical, jaded or mean. It is vital, wistful and filled with sweet ache, with loneliness and longing and the manifold pleasures thereof. The narrator counts the things he will miss if only he could be around to miss them: birds, clouds, paintings, making love, every star. Art, he suggests, "is an inventory of missing." Love, the imagination and desire—these are of a single piece. They dwell on absence, the perishable, on what escapes our grasp. The narrator sits with Marie in the empty cafe. She's leaving him. He can visit her sometimes, she says. Once, long ago and far away, he recalls, "we saw God in the weld of sea and sky." But he's old and wise enough to know, and to ask, "what then would it change, seeing God?"

For all its gravity, *Self Portraits* is also terrifically funny. Tuten writes with enviable mastery. Who else could get away with beginning a story, "The sardines were not forthcoming," without sounding like a wiseass? Instead of sardines, the protagonist and his wife (not Marie but the toothy rich woman the narrator married instead) are served bowls of olives and squirming hirsute worms that have "childish red lips." Dalí and Buñuel are in the air, so another waiter in another story brings "a platter of sliced eyeballs," each one "plucked from the forehead of a baby Cyclops, so hard to find these days of Homeric disenchantment." In "Self Portrait With Circus," the narrator wants Marie all to himself at dinner. But she won't go out unless he asks Eddie, "the bitter midget," to accompany them, and if he invites Eddie, he knows he'll also have to invite the elephants—"you know how jealous they get"—and if the elephants come, he'll have to ask the lions too, and the dancing snakes, and there's no shaking Mario the strongman.

Self Portraits is a rich, gorgeous, almost perfect collection. It is a book about endings, published at a moment when we appear to have reached the end of something. The empire is crumbling and with it the brittle optimism that for decades kept at bay the fundamental, tragic transience of life upon which Tuten eloquently insists. In his darkest, most apocalyptic story, "The Park on Fire," the narrator wanders around Central Park as fighter planes pass over the city. Gangs of children march with "naked banners soaked in blood." A García Lorca–like poet has been beaten and left to die. The fascists have won, or is it the fundamentalists? It's not clear, except that the winners don't like books or art or unwed lovers. "Park on Fire" would seem too easy and familiar a humanist lament, except that none of it is simply literal and all of it hurts: "Everywhere everything we had ever learned was burning, everywhere everything we had remembered or would remember was burning, everywhere everything we were and had dreamed of becoming was burning." There's no bright consolation here, just noble example. Tuten contemplates the loss of everything—not just the circumscribed details of his life but the whole universe in which he loved. He leaves the door open behind him and walks away with a sad chuckle, a knowing wink, a song. ■

Options Open

by BARRY SCHWABSKY

In 1984, while preparing for the great Kurt Schwitters retrospective that MoMA was to mount the next year, a member of the museum's curatorial staff noticed a discrepancy between one of its Schwitters assemblages, *The Cherry Picture (Merzbild 32A. Das Kirschbild)*, from 1921, and a photograph taken of the structure in 1954, when it entered the collection: a cork attached to the surface of the piece had somehow migrated to a different spot altogether. Worse still, a photograph of *The Cherry Picture* published in 1924 shows no cork at all. Was the wayward bottle stop a belated addition by Schwitters, an artist known to have kept fiddling with his works when he could? And if so, where does it really belong? Or did someone else add the cork and yet another person unknown move it? After reviewing the evidence, MoMA conservator Antoinette King (in an essay published in 1992) found it to be inconclusive. The prominence of the cork "creates a particular formal unity in the assemblage elements," she noted, "entirely changing Schwitters's original work, if it is indeed not his own addition"—going on to cite the artist's conviction that "all that matters in a work of art is that all parts should be interrelated and evaluated against each other." But what if the parts tend to drift?

THE MENIL COLLECTION, HOUSTON/PHOTOGRAPH © JANET WOODARD

Untitled (okolade), by Kurt Schwitters, 1926

I was sorry not to find *The Cherry Picture* in "Kurt Schwitters: Color and Collage," the first American museum show devoted to the

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artist since the one at MoMA twenty-five years ago, now on view at the Menil Collection in Houston through January 30. (The show also tours the Princeton University Art Museum, March 26–June 26, and the Berkeley Art Museum at the University of California, August 3–November 27.) It would have been nice to see whether that little cork has continued to bob around as a reminder that even now there is something very difficult to pin down in Schwitters's art—which, it's been said, "was never about the object itself, but the dynamic of relations that appeared in the course of its making."

HARVARD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM/PHOTOGRAPH © KATYA KALLSEN

Mz 443[?]/Untitled (Kao), by Kurt Schwitters, 1922

If so, that's a problem for museums: all we have left are the objects. These always point back to the dynamic of their making, but when exhibiting them an emphasis on their static containment is the course of least resistance. And many of those that Schwitters left us, above all his collages, are objects of rare wholeness, harmony and radiance, their beauty all the more astonishing, given the funky stuff they're made from: "materials I happened to have at hand," Schwitters said, "such as streetcar tickets, cloakroom checks, bits of wood, wire, twine, bent wheels, tissue paper, tin cans, chips of glass, etc." Schwitters called this art of mixed materials *Merz*, taking the neologism from one of his collages, an element of which was a bit of paper bearing the word *Kommerzbank* (commercial bank) that had been cut up, leaving only the middle syllable. The making of the collages and assemblages seems to have been mostly a matter of moving things around, keeping them in play until the last possible moment: "He spread flour and water over the paper," one witness recalled, "then moved and shuffled and manipulated his scraps of paper around in the paste while the paper was wet. With his finger-tips he worked little pieces of crumbled paper into the wet surface; also spread tints of water color or gouache around to get variations in shadings of tone. In this way he used flour both as paste and as paint. Finally he removed the excess paste with a damp rag, leaving some like an overglaze in places where he wanted to veil or mute a part of the color."

And the color is mostly veiled or muted. So this exhibition's subtitle, "Color and Collage," comes as something of a surprise. If modern color is that of the Impressionists, of Matisse, of Mondrian—the ones whose clear, sharp, even aggressive hues seem to cry out, "Away with the brown sauce of the old masters!"—what you get from Schwitters is something altogether different. His collages and assemblages are typically dominated by grays, browns and beiges, or by pale or schmutzy hues, subdued sometimes almost to the point of indeterminacy. Schwitters is a tonalist in the classic tradition; when the collector Katherine Dreier wrote that his work reminded her of Rembrandt, he agreed, "I feel the greatest affinity to him.... I live in a world of nuances, and I am delighted that you grasped the essence of my work right away"—this, in an era when Dreier's adviser, Marcel Duchamp, imagined a "reciprocal readymade" consisting of "a Rembrandt used as an ironing board." It's just not true that, as the exhibition's curator Isabel Schulz claims, "Within the avant-garde, and compared to the collages of Cubism and the material pictures of other Constructivists…Schwitters's Merz painting offered an unusually bright palette." Even the works that are closest to geometrical abstraction, like *Relief mit Kreuz und Kugel (Merz 1924, 1. Relief With Cross and Sphere)*, from 1924, or *Relief mit rotem Segment (Relief With Red Segment)*, from 1927, where the forms are much more perspicuous and the color rather cleaner than is typical for Schwitters, are still very far from the clear-cut structure and pure primary colors of, say, De Stijl. Just as the organization of the forms is a bit cockeyed by comparison, the hues are more muffled, grayed out, retrieved from a world of nuances. Like almost everything else in his work, the color seems to be in transition from one state to another.

The task of looking at Schwitters's works, finally, is that of keeping them in transition, catching them mutating, rescuing them from the stasis to which their material condition—and the art museum's conspiracy of permanence—might seem to have condemned them. If the collages are generally more magical than the assemblages, it might be because the visually heavier, more obdurate nature of the materials out of which the lat-

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ter are constructed makes it harder for the mind and eye to keep their parts in play—to maintain what for Schwitters was the essence of a work of art, its rhythm. "Every artwork throughout history has had to fulfill this primary requirement," he wrote in 1926, "to be rhythm, or else it isn't art." Or as an American contemporary of Schwitters put it just a few years later, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.

Less well known than either the collages or the assemblages are Schwitters's free-standing sculptures, many of them made toward the end of his life while living in England, where he had gone (after a sojourn in Norway) to escape the Nazis; a few of them are on view in Houston. They are mostly made from scraps of wood, and in all but one case an apparent unity has been imposed by a surface layer of plaster or paint so that their composite nature is less evident—something of a surprise once you've gotten used to how the collages and assemblages glory in their heterogeneity. While some of the assemblages of the later 1920s (when Schwitters was most influenced by abstractionists like his friend Theo van Doesburg) have a rectilinearity that recalls De Stijl and the Bauhaus, these abstract sculptures are different, freely mixing geometrical and biomorphic forms to create structures that are less simple than they first appear, and that have a vulnerable, almost abject quality that seems closer in spirit to the three-dimensional work of later artists like Cy Twombly and early Bruce Nauman than to any of Schwitters's contemporaries.

To some extent, these sculptures bear the influence of the work Schwitters did on his most famous and least seen work, the *Merzbau* or, as he sometimes called it, *Cathedral of Erotic Misery*. He built the *Merzbau* in several rooms in his apartment building in Hannover (where he was born in 1887) starting sometime in the 1920s and continuing until he escaped Germany in 1937; the building was destroyed by Allied bombing in 1943. (In the meantime he'd started working on another *Merzbau*, in Lysaker, Norway, which he had to abandon when the Nazis invaded in 1940. Finally, in 1946, Schwitters began a *Merz* barn in Ambleside, in the Lake District in the north of England, but by then he was in very frail health and made little progress on it before his death in 1948. A fragment of it survives in the Hatton Gallery of the University of Newcastle.) It's hard to know how to date the inception of the project, since it started out as a number of separate *Merz* "columns," apparently heaps of materials that only gradually—as Gwendolen Webster writes in the Menil's catalog (distributed by Yale University Press, $50)—"modulated into incipient artworks, though the borderline between a pile of refuse and an artwork was never more than obscure." As the distinction between one "column" and another grew hazy and then finally irrelevant, what was originally a studio became an ever-growing environmental artwork in itself. It was still divided into various distinct areas, designated as "grottos," "caves" and "rooms," but they were not really self-contained; each was designed to lead on to the next. "Each part of the interior serves as an intermediary element to its neighboring part," Schwitters wrote in 1933. "There are no details which constitute a unified and circumscribed composition." By that time, the *Merzbau* had not only grown to encompass several rooms; it had also accumulated archaeological strata, with much of the original material (what one observer called "a hallucinatory confusion of tiny fetish objects") apparently buried beneath more recent layers of construction, mostly much cleaner and more abstract than the earlier ones. How important were the buried layers to the work as it continued? Certainly for Schwitters—who was not only its creator

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but its primary audience—they were crucial; if he'd wanted to reject them completely he could have destroyed them rather than preserve them unseen. And since the only way anyone else was ever likely to see the *Merzbau* was to be led through it by Schwitters himself, we can only wonder to what extent the experience of the work was inseparable from the narrative of at least some of its history.

Schwitters's collages and assemblages tell something of the story of their history to the attentive viewer, but none of the development of the *Merzbau* is evident in the full-scale reconstruction of one room (on exhibit in Houston), based on photographs taken in 1933. Fascinating as it is, the reconstruction is a classic example of Baudrillardian simulation without depth, a copy made without an original, since everything that made the *Merzbau* what it was, other than a single surface stratum that was probably superseded by the time Schwitters was forced to abandon the project in 1937, is absent. What is lost in this atemporal reconstruction is precisely what was crucial for Schwitters, the way "time lives in space for all times. Thus space becomes a parable for time and points toward eternal creation." It would have been better to represent the *Merzbau* through photographs and other documents that might have been able to suggest—without pretending to reconstruct—its development through time.

How to show time at work in space is a problem for any museum; an artist like Schwitters throws it into even sharper relief. Much the same is true of Blinky Palermo, another artist from Germany with a knack for making extraordinary things out of unpromising everyday materials, and whose work has been less seen than heard about. Except for a few small shows of graphic works and editions, there hasn't been an American exhibition of Palermo's work since 1987, when the Dia Art Foundation, whose co-founder Heiner Friedrich had been Palermo's dealer, exhibited *To the People of New York City*, the remarkable suite of abstract paintings (forty panels grouped into fifteen parts) that was found completed in his studio in Düsseldorf after his sudden death in the Maldives in 1977. Now the Dia has organized a traveling retrospective, curated by Lynne Cooke, which you can see through January 16 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, February 24–May 15; or Dia: Beacon and CCS Bard in New York, June 25–October 31.

As Susanne Küper writes in the catalog, *Blinky Palermo: Retrospective 1964-1977* (Dia Art Foundation in association with Yale University Press, $50), "His paintings imply the possibility of ceaseless transformation of the constellation of their elements and permanent motion." Whereas Schwitters composed his works by joining scattered fragments, Palermo often presented his as groups of fragments that might not quite link up. "*To the People* bars a single vantage point from which its atomized members could unite," explains another catalog contributor, Suzanne Hudson, constituting "a far from arbitrary if still ultimately inexplicable episodic chain." Like Schwitters's *Merzbau*, this is an art that doesn't want to be pinned down. Although much of Palermo's work may recall geometrical abstraction and Minimalism, one senses that its motivation was very different. Palermo never tried to reduce painting (or art more broadly) to an essence or to produce a polemical demonstration of its historical *telos*. His art was deliberately elusive; introverted but with a steely ambition evident in the obduracy with which it declines to present anything that could be interpreted as a statement of purpose. Nor was Palermo willing to make any statement on its behalf. He was notoriously reticent, but according to one of his rare interviews, "I pursue no specific direction in the sense of a style. I have no program. What I have is an aesthetic concept, whereby I try to keep as many expressive options open for myself as possible."

Not that Palermo (who was born Peter Schwarze in Leipzig in 1943, became Peter Heisterkamp when he was adopted by a family of that name and was finally bestowed with his *louche* moniker, cribbed from an American mobster and boxing promoter, either by his classmates at the Düsseldorf Art Academy or by their professor Joseph Beuys) pursued all that many of his options. Maybe it was just that in his brief career he never had enough time; he pursued his main lines of inquiry over a period of several years, testing their potential, in a manner as methodical as it was intuitive. It might also be that he found the best way of keeping options open was to keep them in reserve. Few artists have succeeded in making the empty wall space around their objects quite so resonant, and the atmosphere of things undone surrounding his works takes on a rare poignancy. That wouldn't be true if he had lived to maturity, like his great friend Gerhard Richter. As life goes on, options tend to harden into positions, the avoidance of positions to deteriorate into eclecticism.

While the works Palermo referred to simply as "objects" might lean toward the Charybdis of eclecticism—after all, the term is really a catch-all for a wide range of things united only by their inhabiting an indefinite terrain between painting and sculpture—his "cloth pictures" are threatened by the Scylla of dogmatism. The cloth pictures are also the easiest of his works either to enjoy or dismiss, depending on your predisposition. "Modernism by the yard," the art historian Christine Mehring called them appreciatively in her recent monograph *Blinky Palermo: Abstraction of an Era* (Yale University Press, $60)—though you can see how the same phrase might be used in disdain. They are gorgeous abstract paintings made without paint, using bolts of ready-made fabric, most often in three broad horizontal bands. If you love the rich color harmonies of Mark Rothko or the somewhat more austere ones of, say, Brice Marden's Grove Group, you'll probably like these too, and yet you're not likely to feel these are emanations of a man's soul the way you might with Rothko, or of the light and air of a place in which the artist has immersed himself, as with Marden. Understated brushwork, a subtle layering of tones, a sense of the painter's corporeal engagement with the making of color such as are found in the work of painters like Rothko and Marden—all of these are absent. Palermo has done nothing but choose this and that bolt of fabric rather than others, but in the choosing, everything is transformed by his delicate sense of chromatic relations.

Yet Palermo's cool detachment can be disturbing. Isn't there something too easy about all this? Even a noted ironist like Sigmar Polke later admitted to Mehring, "I thought [it] was too simple, you know, really dopey. And while others were toiling at I don't know what, he sewed two pieces

Man How to Listen

the horizon has an edge.

It is a place & we live here,

under the grass, over the earth.

No pomegranate tree grows

under there, there where only

demons bring fruit.

SARAH RIGGS

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of fabric together and had the day off." There is something peculiarly divisive about these works, which may be part of the point: if you are willing to countenance the conceptual trenchancy of the gesture, then the paintings' effect might strike you as suspiciously seductive or decorative; if their beauty speaks to you, you might be put off by the casual way Palermo arrived at it.

As with Schwitters, much of Palermo's most important work no longer exists. He made nearly thirty wall drawings and paintings and planned several others that were never executed, all between 1968 and 1973. Most of them involved simple, seemingly insignificant interventions; he often outlined the shapes of some of the walls in a given room or filled them in with a different color, leaving only a border of the original white. Many viewers found the wall paintings dull or even unnoticeable; others, curiously disorienting. In 1971 Palermo exhibited documentation of the wall works he had done so far, using sketches, plans, photos, written notes and so on—and this is how they are presented today. Yet he acknowledged such a work would survive "only as the memory of the person who actually stood in it." Whatever the phenomenological effect of what Mehring calls their "combination of banality with a heightened sensitivity to space and perception" when seen in the flesh, trying to reconstruct it through these documents alone can be perplexing. Yet a certain befuddlement must have been part of Palermo's initial intent with the wall paintings, poised as they seem to have been on the edge between heightened and routine perception.

In 1973 Palermo left Germany for New York, where he would stay for three years. He found that what he created there was "different from the kind of art I make in Germany. I use different materials and media and I find my work influenced by the country I am in." No more cloth paintings, no more wall drawings, hardly any more of those oddly shaped painted (or, anyway, colored) objects. Most of the "metal pictures" he made in New York follow a consistent formula: groupings of, usually, four panels, fairly widely separated, with each panel bearing a single main acrylic color area bracketed by bands of one other color at the top and the bottom. Whereas Palermo's "objects" had been fragmentary in appearance, each panel of the metal pictures appears to be a self-contained whole; its fragmentary nature is revealed only by its relation (or lack thereof) to the group. The colors are intense, saturated, and they recur from one panel in a group to another, but not usually in any systematic way. They sometimes seem to refer to Mondrian's palette—the three primaries, red, yellow and blue, plus black and white—yet they always swerve away from such purity toward mixtures that, once again, remind me of Rothko, but a Rothko compacted, hardened and without the sense of spread the elder painter allowed his colors so that they could suggest the infinite. Spaced as they are, the metal paintings command the wall by punctuating it. They are not expansive in the way of a Rothko or a Barnett Newman, but neither are they contained like a Mondrian or Albers.

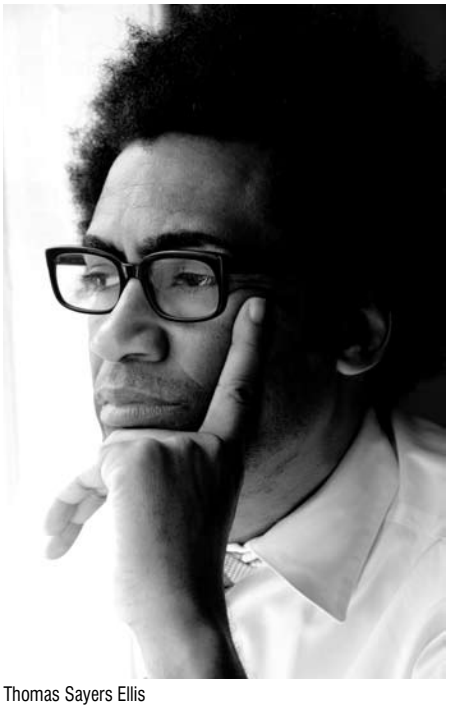
Palermo's was an art of ambivalence, and the main defect of the show at LACMA—that it is missing *To the People of New York City*—can at least be justified by the fact that it helps maintain this ambivalence. But it's still pretty strange. After all, the Dia Foundation, which owns the work, organized the show. Is the piece absent because the foundation couldn't bear to part with it for so long, or was LACMA unwilling to accord Palermo enough room to include a work that requires at least 275 linear feet of wall space? In any case, the danger of exhibiting the work is that it could hardly help being seen as a culmination, the climactic moment when Palermo's ambivalence transcended itself in some grand synthesis. Maybe that's true, but what I think is that it was just a momentary resting on Palermo's stubbornly irresolute path. Dedicating the work to the city he had just left suggests that *To the People* might have been the last of the metal pictures, a summation of sorts but in the sense that he could end the series once it was clear to him how to make it into the statement of an artistic program. Rather than pursue the program, I suspect he'd have gone on to test some of the other options he'd left open to himself. What they would have been, we can only speculate. ■

One of the Various

by JORDAN DAVIS

Literary history, at least as far as race in America is concerned, is stuck, and the doctrine of separate but equal has to be overturned again and again, with every book published. If the doctrine were dead, then it would be common knowledge that Robert Hayden is at least as remarkable a poet as Robert Lowell, or that the Hugheses—Ted and Langston—run about even; or that it would be ignorant of a young poet to study Elizabeth Bishop to the exclusion of Rita Dove, or vice versa. It would also finally be possible to assess the claim that Amiri Baraka's work—his early work as LeRoi Jones, anyway—outdoes them all.

Fortunately, poems aren't written at the service of literary history. They're written in the moment, often in ways mindful of tradition (which doesn't rhyme with literary history), and anybody who tells you otherwise is trying to trick you out of your birthright. Poets who start out with one eye on literary history find out sooner or later that they need to focus both eyes—maybe all three—on the poem. In *Skin, Inc.*, his complicated second book of poems, Thomas Sayers Ellis seeks a space apart from the demands of both history and the immediate moment, to protest the overwhelming conditions he finds, or as he puts it in the title poem, "To sit-in/in the sit-in/in the margins."



RACHEL ELIZA GRIFFITHS

Thomas Sayers Ellis

Skin, Inc.
Identity Repair Poems.
By Thomas Sayers Ellis.
Graywolf. 181 pp. $23.

The problem is that, even now, if you raise your voice, people start expecting you to provide the answers, to be not one among

Jordan Davis is co-editor of The Hat. *A chapbook of his poems is forthcoming this winter.*

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the many but the one to lead and speak on behalf of the many. In "Marcus Garvey Vitamins," from his first book, *The Maverick Room* (2005), Ellis declaimed at the top of his voice that the one should not be him: "*Don't* like it, *don't* Pulitzer me." He was kidding, but don't laugh. Consider this remark from 2003 by critic William Logan about Ellis's colleague Kevin Young, whose first and second books had been nominated for big prizes:

> It can be difficult to be a young black poet now. You're courted by publishers and anthologists, by the halls of academe; yet post-colonial and subaltern and diaspora scholars, who fight turf battles over what to call themselves, tell you what to write and how to write it, questioning your language and your motives (or, worse, applauding them) before you've written a line. Easier, I suspect, to be a young poet everyone is ignoring.

Easier for what? To do what? Write a memorable poem that makes everyone around take notice? Then where are all the show-stopping thousands of young ignored poets? Is their game good enough to stand up to some of the best trash talk of our times, talk so dismissive it doesn't even bother with the second person?

> All their fences
> All their prisons
> All their exercises
> All their agendas
> All their stanzas look alike

I didn't think so. Logan may have had a point about the pressure of premature attention, but just as the pressures of rhyme and meter can still lead to happy accidents of meaning, it might be good for a poet to learn early how to shape expectations as well as metaphors. Along with the difficulty of being the subject of attention comes the opportunity to be the subject of your own sentence, your own strophe, your own simile. Among poets, the anxious force of Ellis's chains of equivalences could not go unnoticed:

> All their tables of contents
> All their Poet Laureates
> All their Ku Klux classics
> All their Supreme Court justices
> Except one, except one
> Exceptional one. Exceptional or not,
> One is not enough.
> All their stanzas look alike.

What did go unnoticed, however, was who or what exactly was being signified on (the reference to the late Nigerian novelist Flora Nwapa's excellent *One Is Enough* is a bonus). The poem is anything but an example of black-and-white thinking, which it plays on to get to the heart of an overwhelming confusion—the one between poet and poem, and the one between poet and public. The anticlimactic ending clinches it: "Even this, after publication,/Might look alike. Disproves/My stereo types." Ellis is not having it both ways; he's just not having it.

Most poets are still just finding out about their stories in their second books, but Ellis is not most poets. *The Maverick Room* came in at 121 pages, twice the length of the average collection of poems; so *Skin, Inc.*, which is 181 pages long, might be considered Ellis's third through fifth books. Raised "in a so-called single parent household in Washington, D.C.," and educated at Harvard and Brown, Ellis came to national attention as a literary community organizer. With fellow poet and Harvard grad Sharan Strange, he founded the Dark Room Reading Series out of their rented house in Cambridge in 1989. It didn't take long for the project to outgrow that setting.

The reading series featured African-American writers both hugely successful and secretly influential, from Alice Walker and Terry McMillan to Samuel Delany and Bell Hooks. Word about the readings got around, and soon people were commuting from hours away to attend (including Natasha Trethewey, then a graduate student in poetry at the University of Massachusetts). The series morphed into the Dark Room Collective, a "pre or PMFA" that played a role in the development of award-winning poets as aesthetically diverse as Carl Phillips, Kevin Young, Tracy K. Smith and Major Jackson, and also drew the bright light of publicity from the *Boston Globe* and *The New Yorker*. It ran until the late '90s, its decade-long existence coinciding with the beginning and end of the first major phase of mainstream rap, from the rise of Public Enemy to Jay-Z's breakthrough.

While everything around Ellis was blowing up, in the hip-hop sense of the phrase, he took his time with his poems. The ones in his chaplet *The Good Junk* (1996) and his chapbook *The Genuine Negro Hero* (2001) have more in common with the self-knowing work of Ellis's Nobel laureate teachers Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott than with platinum recording artists. The music in them is played by people, not CD players. "Sticks" starts out as a disconcerting family romance ("I learned to use my hands watching him/Use his, pretending to slap mother/When he slapped mother"), but rather than closing with catharsis and confrontation, the poem ends with an uncertain resilience in which the pain—the narrative—is channeled into writing and drumming:

> The page tightened like a drum
> Resisting the clockwise twisting
> Of a handheld chrome key,
> The noisy banging and tuning of
> growth.

Throughout these early poems, drums figure as a means of escape and entrapment (snare). "A Baptist Beat" conflates a go-go performance with a church service ("The tambourine shakes like a collection plate"), while "Tambourine" inverts the simile ("Sundays, it took a sinner's beating"). Ellis addresses the cowbell that called the neighborhood to clubs and block parties, but also families during blackouts: "Down-to-earth, hardheaded, hollow, loud./I know your weak spots. You know mine." This conflicted sense of the sources and meanings of rhythm is personified in "Tambourine Tommy," the story of a local character just this side of St. Elizabeths who showed up at events with tambourines and bells strapped to his body. Ellis is aware of the comedy and pathos in the situation, but he leaves the reader with solidarity in suffering: "the way/He beat himself/(head, shoulders, knees/and toes), proved he//Was one of us."

The Maverick Room shuffles the chapbooks' personal poems with newer poems about the outsize personalities clustered around musician-impresario George Clinton and his bands Parliament and Funkadelic. A reader could have worried that the abrupt change of subject matter from local characters to famous musicians would deprive Ellis of the lived intensity his poems thrived on. That reader's worry would have been misplaced. The book opens with an ode to Garry Shider, the voice at the beginning of Parliament's *Mothership Connection*, better known as Starchild. Ellis writes:

> Newborn, diaper-clad, same as a child,
> That's how you'll leave this world.
> No, you won't die, just blast off.

The diaper, the spaceship: Shider's iconography was crazy, and also a way of reminding the audience of funk's origins, not Saturn but a similarly alien place somewhere near the gut. Four stanzas later, after Shider blasts off and the "black hole at the center/Of the naked universe" responds, Ellis riffs on one

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of Parliament's best-known songs to set the stage for his own arrival, "Roofs everywhere cracking, tearing,/Breaking like water."

As poetic births go, *The Maverick Room* was promising: personal but not private, accessible but not obvious. The risks of reclaiming the Clinton universe from within the heart of the Bush II era paid off. Both enormously successful and incorrigibly idiosyncratic, P-Funk smuggled the pleasures of bop back into dance music while underscoring a message that deserves to be called hilarious, positive and above all autonomous. Following their lead, Ellis teased his audience while expanding his personal mythology. And the influence of P-Funk's over-the-top portmanteau titles, such as "Gloryhallastoopid" and"Psychoalphadiscobetabioaquadoloop," had the liberating effect on Ellis's aesthetic predicted in the title of Funkadelic's 1970 album, *Free Your Mind… And Your Ass Will Follow*.

At the same time, the *don't* Ellis uttered in "Marcus Garvey Vitamins" as a dare—"*Don't* like it"—fulfilled its purpose: the book is sui generis, a record of Ellis's experiences and excitements, not a labor at the service of literary history. As he says in "Balloon Dog (1993)," "poetry escapes/poems that/contain more//ego than/feeling." It's unclear whether this poem loves or hates its insight that a poem might be something like a rubber tube, filled with hot air, twisted ingeniously, a solid scribble. This is a signal moment of the poet articulating his resistance to other people's rules for what a poem has to be: poems are almost never going to be permanent, so stop worrying about that. But the poem at hand better have enough whatever to fill the form into a specific, recognizable shape. Call it empathy: "Nothing,/not even//love,/should have to live up to/or as long as//sculpture's attempted/permanence."

Skin, Inc. is subtitled "Identity Repair Poems," which is more evocative of the dimensions of *don't* than the book's title. *Don't* is there from the opening poem "As Segregation, As Us," and so is the eternal United States/first-person-plural pun: "I don't allude like you. I don't call me anything." The problem with negative imperatives, though, is that it can be hard to grasp both the instruction and the negation, so *don't* risks triggering another in reply: *don't tell me what to do*. In small doses *don't* clears the air; as a bona fide program it is a recipe for self-destruction.

Around the time of publication of *The Maverick Room*, Ellis was editing a project called *Quotes Community: Notes for Black Poets*, a commonplace book of 600 entries by 140 poets on "what's beneath writing." It is also a meditation on the allure and dangers of *don't*. In an interview introducing an excerpt from the book in the noteworthy journal *Callaloo*, Ellis expressed his hope that "sharing certain 'close-to-home' practices and personal beliefs about the 'being' in being a poet and being black will reveal healthy samenesses and healthy differences within the community, and, perhaps, generate some new ways of creatively discussing the complexities of that being." For whatever reason, the book doesn't appear to have been published, which is a shame. The sixty-one entries excerpted in *Callaloo* are all as tantalizing as the first two:

> An idea occurs to me: I have to decide whether all black writing in the New World is about one thing, and whether that one thing is emancipation. This seems false to me, but I like the idea of poetry as an unfinished historical project. At least it means that there's a common task and a common place to start from.
>
> —Mark McMorris

> Avoid didactic poems at all costs. (Don't preach to the reader.) If this is your leaning, write an essay. If you wish to make a serious point, however, *show*, *don't tell*. If you wish to make a creative point, use poetic structures such as metaphors, similes, understated language, and punctuation.
>
> —Dolores Kendrick

The remarks run the gamut from observation to declaration to proscription, and Ellis says he hopes the effect will be of the voices rising "above a family reunion." But the complexities might include outright self-contradiction: what's more didactic than saying, "Avoid didactic poems at all costs"? In an interview in the following issue of *Callaloo*, Ellis makes it clear he's aware of the risks involved:

> I believe that W.H. Auden said one of the things a young poet needs to learn is to pun, and I think I took it upon (intended) myself to shake and bake and mix and remix pun, irony, and now radical black rule breaking—often trying successfully and unsuccessfully to merge every possibility of what it is possible to receive (and share) into one blood.

If Auden did indeed say that, he ought to have apologized for it. To learn to pun is to learn how to do so judiciously. Slightly different is Auden's line in "The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning" that "Good poets have a weakness for bad puns." In any case, Ellis seems to be aware that an interest in rule-gathering is a step away from woolgathering. He's willing to risk error for the reward of bringing more into the poem than he could by playing it safe.

For the first sixty pages of *Skin, Inc.*, the contradictions and broken rules pay off. At a recent reading at New York City's KGB Bar, Ellis introduced "Or," in which each line contains at least one use of the title's sound or letters, as an ode to "my favorite conjunction." Part sound poem, part fretting elaboration of alternatives, it begins "Or Oreo, or/worse" and ends with a meditation once again on how to understand fear and anxiety as a product of black-and-white thinking:

> Neighbor
>
> or fear of…
> of terror or border.
> Or all organized
> minorities.

He inverts the drumming motif of his early work in "My Meter Is Percussive," announcing up front,

> I am sucker-punching I,
> the I that informs
>
> these lines like
> only I know I know how.

Having implicated himself, he's free to speak up about anxiety, appropriation and projection with symmetrical efficiency:

> In life, they clutch
> their purses because
>
> they want you to think
> you've stolen something.
>
> In art, they clutch
> their purses because
>
> they know you know
> they've stolen something.

The sequences "Spike Lee at Harvard" and "Society for the Friends of Former Property" build on these successes, the first relating Ellis's experience working at Cambridge's renowned and claustrophobically tiny poetry store, the Grolier Poetry Book Shop, the second riffing on as many live-wire words of segregation as sense will allow. The anger stays near the surface, which makes it easier for Ellis to work off it. In "The Identity Repairman," Ellis narrates the transition

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from African to African-American in six quatrains. Here are the last three:

COLORED

I am weary of working
to prove myself equal.
I will use education
to make my children superior.

BLACK

My heart is a fist.
I fix Blackness.
My fist is a heart.
I beat Whiteness.

AFRICAN AMERICAN

Before I was born,
I absorbed struggle.
Just looking
at history hurts.

The best poem in the book is "Mr. Dynamite Splits," an elegy for James Brown published several months after Brown's death in December 2006. In the book, Ellis expands the poem into "A perform-a-form, photo-elegy with footnotes for feet work," with photographs taken by Ellis from outside the Apollo Theater, where the New York memorial to Brown was held forty-four years after Brown's concert there set the template for live recordings. The photographs—bewildered children next to mournful parents, smiling aging fans holding up tribute T-shirts, crowds behind barricades—go beyond illustrating the poem's celebration of a performer to give depth to the assertions in the poem:

you and your Revue were

the only flames the hood could
afford,
and by "hood" I mean "nation"
and by "nation" I mean "community"
and by "community"

I mean any one of the various
Black "folk" Americas
within Black America,
the Constitution's future re-framers.

Your famous flames
were not the famous flames
of Civil War or Civil Rights.
These flames were raw chicken guts

and a bewildered next-time fire

At the 1962 Apollo gig immortalized as *Live at the Apollo*, Brown sang, "I'm not singing this song only for myself now,/I'm singing it for you too./And when I say something that makes you feel good inside/When I say that little thing/I said that little part that might sting you in your heart now/I want to hear you scream/I want to hear you say OW/I want to hear you say OW/Don't just say ow say OW/and I believe my work will be done." The poem and the photographs say OW. The footnotes to the poem do not. They are a tedious distraction. For example, the footnotes to the second and third stanzas quoted above say this:

> An all within one, the soul of many, every read note. Emphasize "folk" as poly-purpose, the hardest working utterance—k to c and c from lower to upper case, the protest of climb and crash into law. Stage, stanza, some silence, a moment of preface, or breathing, before the door of pronoun. One must recite the emergence of fire so that it becomes attitude, weather and aesthetic.

Why the footnotes say this I do not know—I can hear all kinds of resonances in "folk," both poignant and obscene, but Ellis loses me around "utterance." What's clear is that Ellis is determined to worry "Mr. Dynamite Splits" past the point of diminishing returns. It's as if Wallace Stevens's Snow Man showed up at the funeral to declare that "One must have a mind of winter" to mourn the Godfather of Soul.

In an interview upon the publication of *The Maverick Room*, Ellis confided, "I'm sure I've traded simile in for signifying (find Gates, Jr. and his monkey—see what I mean), because everybody can simile and there are some easy and bad ones floating around out there—it's gotten so easy to simile.... I've also replaced punning and referencing with (black) trick moves, okey dokes and trope-a-dopes." The reference is to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Here is Gates on his project:

> Let us descend, once again, into the shadowy realm of myth, to ascertain the black tradition's fundamental idea of itself, buried or encoded in its primal myths—ambiguous, enigmatic, profoundly figurative, complex rhetorical structures—which seem to have been scattered through several concealed fragments, as if to protect its own code from (mis)appropriation.

This might go some way toward explaining the less-than-helpful footnotes as a defensive screen behind which the repair work of mourning can go on in public privacy. Anyway, I'll leave it alone—it's a terrific poem, and would be one of Ellis's best no matter how he wants to shield it. If the book ended there or shortly after, the prize committees and book reviews would have a hard time ignoring it.

The book, however, is only a third done. The middle section, a mélange of commissioned poems, manifestos, a riff on the eye chart and praises of Barack Obama's "presidential blackness," doesn't gel. "A Waste of Yellow" repeats effects and phrasing found in "Song On" but with shorter sentences and stanzas, with less intensity, to less effect. "Sermon on the Unrecognizable Shapes of Change" takes shots at "Boring myth" and "our super weakness," but these balloon shapes remain as unrecognizable at the end of the poem as at the beginning. Sharp observations crop up—"I have seen more photos/of Barack Obama/than I've ever seen//of my own mother"—and are given not quite enough support to become whole moving organic beings. I'm prepared to say this is the inescapable sophomore jinx, which in music usually takes the form of a track by the new star settling scores with people who rejected him back in the day.

And sure enough, "The Judges of Craft" intersperses rejection letters with off-point remarks on craft and life and line and form. At KGB Bar, Ellis read the rejections in a silly voice, as if the editors of these periodicals were Sir Nose d'Voidoffunk. He paused, looked up and disclosed that his publisher had advised him not to include the poem. He paused again and then added, "They were probably right." The last quarter of the book is given over to "Gone Pop," a prosaic sequence about the life and death of Michael Jackson. In *The Maverick Room* Ellis's handling of the P-Funk mythology is assured, organic; here his impersonal investment in the King of Pop raises again the concern that he might be seeking a substitute for feeling. There are fine moments of writing and some amazing neglected bits of information—such as the account of Jackson's maternal great-great-, great- and grandfather, all named Prince Albert Screws, and the brief biography of Ola Ray, co-star of the "Thriller" video—but the work feels incomplete, as if it were written out of obligation and in haste, as if publishing a book were catching a train.

Kenneth Koch remarked that "Poetry, which is written while no one is looking, is meant to be looked at for all time." The best poems in *Skin, Inc.* have the excellent unself-conscious feeling of which Koch spoke, even when the news is bad and the poet knows nobody is going to want to listen. It's to be hoped that this flood of poems means we can expect a bewildered fire next time. ■

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Puzzle No. 1614

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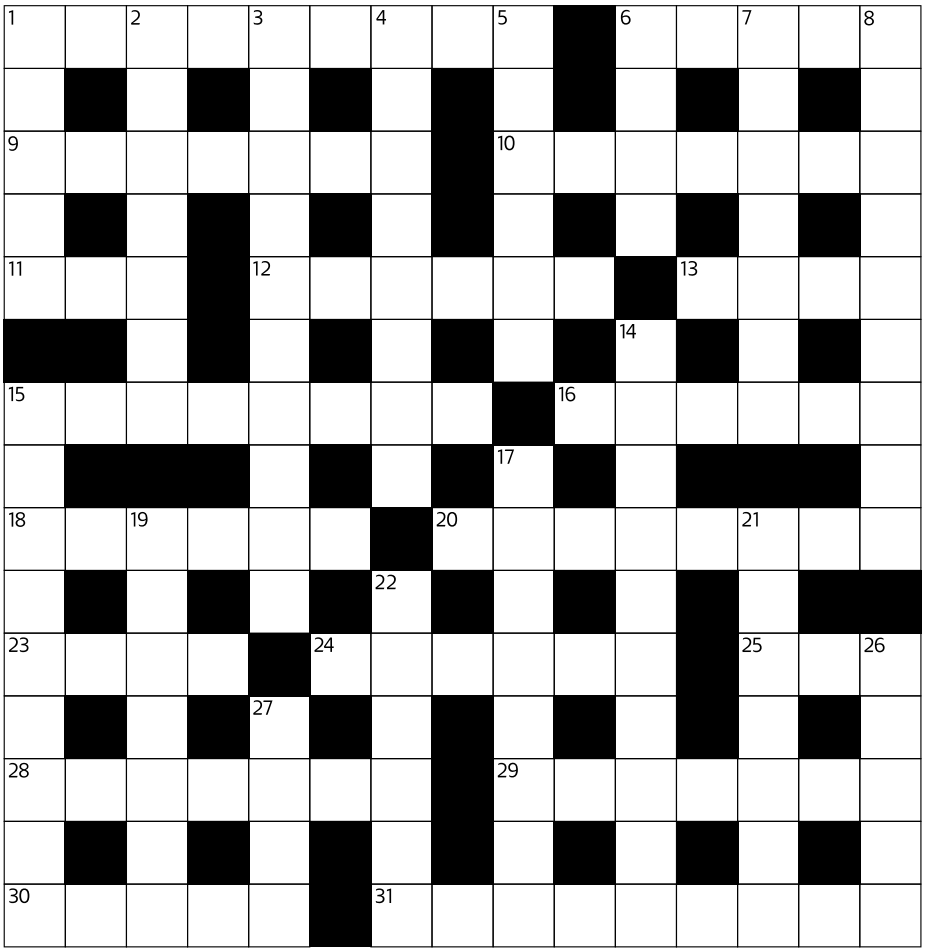

ACROSS

1 See 30

6, 25, 26 and **27** Mother's aboard, with half a score overseas on the mark, to see North on one side and South on the other, as they used to say. (5,3,5,4)

9 The old mare ain't what she used to be; it's equivalent to count over one. (7)

10 Examine the shape of things? The Act of Rebellion doesn't. (7)

11 Still an eye test should show it! (3)

12 See 15 down

13 See 1 down

15 A garden snake might appear attractive. (8)

16 Room at the top? (6)

18 Swell way to pad your account, possibly. (6)

20 One in a rush, for instance, exemplified by the post–Civil War states. (8)

23 Said to be known by authority—not exclusively agriculturists. (4)

24 One of Byron's gleamers. (6)

25 See 6 across

28 Possibly a strain in relations with a former ruler—a close one, in fact. (7)

29 An obvious implement to cut what the oppressive government might do. (7)

30 and **1** across Part of your make-up, if not content with a real flutter? (5,9)

31 It took almost a week and a half to tell how the dream once might be interpreted. (9)

DOWN

1, 22 and **13** across Each one, as the before-and-after ads show in reverse, happens repeatedly at random. (5,3,3,4)

2 It might show that at least one mistake was caught. (7)

3 Does it mark a sort of free-fall, leaving the power behind? (10)

4 It seems the melon had burst in one's own territory. (8)

5 Safe rescue, possibly. (6)

6 See 15 (6)

7 She possessively follows most trouble when cut off the air. (7)

8 Put up for the office man to dine out. (9)

14 You'll find one in a man with a bad master as the most important course. (10)

15, 6 and **12** across The variegated layer of paint responsible for a distinguished member of the family? (3,4,2,4,6)

17 Possibly is come around a place of magic, descriptive of middle-age animals? (8)

19 Prepared for a drop, if you're expecting the game to go your way? (7)

21 Stretch of land, alternatively what might be used on one. (7)

22 See 1 down

26 and **27** See 6 across

This puzzle originally appeared in the January 3/10, 1976, issue.

SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 1613

		U	P	T	O	S	C	R	A	T	C	H		
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